DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 455 326 UD 034 307

AUTHOR	Wilson, Bruce L.; Corbett, H. Dickson
TITLE	"No Excuses": The Eighth Grade Year in Six Philadelphia Middle Schools.
INSTITUTION	Philadelphia Education Fund, PA.
SPONS AGENCY	Pew Charitable Trusts, Philadelphia, PA.
PUB DATE	1999-00-00
NOTE	123p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Philadelphia Education Fund, Seven Benjamin Franklin Parkway, Philadelphia, PA 19103. Tel: 215-665-1400; e-mail: rmanzano@philaedfund.org; Web site: http://www.philaedfund.org.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Tests/Questionnaires (160)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC05 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Achievement; Black Students; Educational Change; Educational Environment; Educational Quality; Equal Education; Grade 8; *Middle School Students; Middle Schools; Poverty; Student Attitudes; Teacher Expectations of Students; Teacher Student Relationship; Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS	Philadelphia School District PA; Reform Efforts

ABSTRACT

This study documented middle school students' perceptions of their educational experiences, tracking how their perceptions evolved over 3 years and corresponding to the Philadelphia School District's implementation of its Children Achieving reform agenda. Fifty 6th graders were chosen from each of six urban schools and interviewed in the spring of each year throughout middle school. Students in the first five schools, who were predominantly African American, did not perceive much change in their schools. Those who did perceive change saw it in regard to student behavior and level of work. Students did not experience a similar curriculum or pedagogy or have equal access to quality teaching. Students wanted teachers who persisted in pushing and helping students, who varied classroom activities, controlled student behavior without ignoring the lesson, and understood students' situations. Students felt that good teachers would not give up on them for any reason. In the sixth school, which had a partnership with an educational research and development center and which was very diverse, there was much more consistency in pedagogy, content, and classroom environment, and students had access to similar educational experiences. An appendix contains student interview protocols. (SM)

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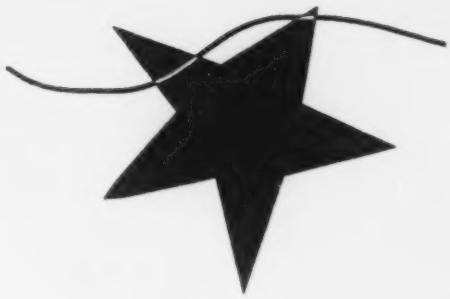

"NO EXCUSES":

The Eighth Grade Year in Six Philadelphia Middle Schools

Bruce L. Wilson and H. Dickson Corbett

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Artwork by: Katherine H. Cantrill

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A Report for the
Philadelphia Education Fund

This report was funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts
through a grant to the
Philadelphia Education Fund

1999

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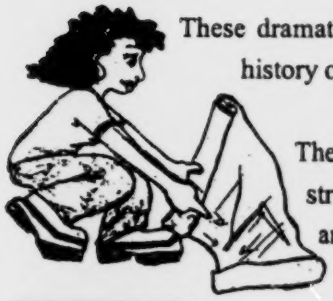
"NO EXCUSES":

THE EIGHTH GRADE YEAR IN FIVE PHILADELPHIA MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Section 1: Introduction

For the last five years, The School District of Philadelphia has been engaged in an ambitious attempt to improve the education of its large and diverse student population. *Children Achieving*, the umbrella term for the reform, seeks to:

1) Set high expectations for everyone by adopting new standards of performance.
2) Design accurate performance indicators to hold everyone accountable for results.
3) Shrink the centralized bureaucracy and let schools make more decisions.
4) Provide intensive, sustained professional development for all staff.
5) Make sure all students are healthy and ready to learn.
6) Create access to the community services and support services students need to succeed in school.
7) Provide up-to-date technology and instructional materials.
8) Engage the public in shaping, understanding, supporting, and participating in school reform.
9) Ensure adequate resources and use them effectively.
10) Address all of these priorities together and for the long term – starting now.



These dramatic and costly steps hope to break the decades-long history of student failure in the city.

The District reports progress implementing several of the structural and organizational elements of its reform plan, and is encouraged by corresponding gains in student

performance (The School District of Philadelphia, 1998). Despite funding shortages, the District has recently announced another set of changes directly aimed at improving these student results. The District has proposed ending all vestiges of social promotion and raising the standards necessary for students to move on to higher grade levels. Recognizing that increasing expectations without correspondingly enriching the instructional support for inner-city students would be a hollow and futile endeavor, the District will demand more of its students only if additional funds for professional development, staffing, and curriculum are forthcoming.

The students in our study, however, seem less sanguine than the District's public relations efforts about improvement in their educational experiences during their middle school years. In the following pages, the students discuss several topics that have direct relevance for the status of the current reform effort in Philadelphia. First, they describe the changes they have seen during their three years in middle school — in their educational plans and experiences, their schools, and their classrooms (Section 3). Second, the students describe the differences in pedagogy, subject content, and learning environment they experience as they move from classroom to classroom (Section 4). Third, students portray the classrooms they want to have (Section 5). This section is the heart of this report and attends to the classroom qualities which improve the level of learning. Fourth, the report discusses a sixth middle school, one that seems to be moving in the direction that students suggest their schools should and is demonstrating a moderate degree of effectiveness (Section 6). Finally, we offer five recommendations taken from the data that will promote success for all students (Section 7).

Before moving to those topics, the report provides a brief overview of the study.

Section 2: Overview of the Study

The overall purposes of the study were to document the middle school students' perceptions of their educational experiences and to track how these perceptions evolve over a three year period that corresponded with The School District of Philadelphia's implementation of its *Children Achieving* reform agenda. The real proof of this reform effort will ultimately reside in increased student success in school – greater participation, higher achievement, and heightened ability to direct their own learning in the future. To attain these results, the quality of students' educational experiences to learn will have to change as well. The assumption of this study is that these changes, if they were substantial, would be reflected in how students talked about school.

Five schools were initially chosen to participate in the study by the Philadelphia Education Fund (PEF). These schools served some of the poorest neighborhoods in the city. Eighty-three to 94 percent of the students qualified for free lunch and were almost entirely minorities (most recent data available). In the final year of the study a sixth school was added. This school, with a comparable student population, had additional resources to implement the District's reforms, including a partnership with a major university. In each school, a random sample of 50 sixth graders was selected. We interviewed these students in the spring of each year during the course of their three-years in middle school. The students reflected diversity in instructional experience, academic performance, behavior, motivation, and gender.

Of the 247 students we talked to the first year, 172 (70 percent) of them were still available for interviews the third year. Each year we encountered about a 20 percent rate of attrition (mostly due to transfers within or outside the system). Of the 172 on the rolls in 1998, we interviewed 153, the remainder being either enrolled but chronically absent, enrolled but suspended, or enrolled and in school but too elusive to locate.

All five schools were led by experienced building principals. In all but one case, these leaders remained stable over the three-year period of our visits. The one school with a leadership change showed little disruption. All five principals embraced the tenets of the District's reform initiative and worked diligently with their staffs to implement ideas they thought would work for their students. But each school had a character of its own.

School #1. The 1,000 sixth through eighth graders at School #1 were almost exclusively African American (99.3%). Relative to the other four schools in the study, the students came from homes that were somewhat better off. Eighty-three percent of the students were from low income families. The school had a higher daily attendance figure (86%) than the other four schools. Students were mostly organized around "pods" with four classrooms sharing a common entry off a rectangular main hall. Students talked of these pods rather than small learning communities (SLCs). Students at School #1 usually shared two teachers for their four core academic subjects.

School #2. The 700 seventh and eighth grade students were spread across the top two floors of a five story building. The exclusively African American population of eighth grade students had four teachers for their academic subjects. The school had undergone a recent reorganization. Attendance (82 percent) and family income (more than 90 percent low income) were both similar to Schools #3 through #5.

School #3. The largest school in the study, with 1,300 predominantly African Americans (98 percent), students in grades six through eight at School #3 shared five floors of building space. This school had the second highest proportion of suspensions per year (17.6%) of the five schools. Unlike the two- or three-teacher teams in the other schools, students often encountered five different teachers for instruction in their core academic subjects. In fact, 35 different teachers worked with the class of eighth graders. The school was organized around seven different SLCs, each with a different occupational focus (e.g. hotel and restaurant; law and government; performing arts; etc.).

School #4. Nearly 1,200 fifth through eighth grade students attended School #4. Relative to the other four schools, School #4 had more racial diversity with two thirds of the students Latino and the rest African American. Students at School # 4 made almost no mention of their SLCs other than to suggest that they attended assemblies based on their SLC assignment. Students were enrolled in five core academic subjects and in most cases saw three different teachers for those subjects. Unlike the experience of students in School #3 (of comparable size), eight teachers shared responsibility for instruction across the eighth grade class.

School #5. This was the smallest school in the sample with a predominantly African American population (86 percent) of 660 students. The remaining students were Latino. This school, which reported the most significant progress on SAT-9 scores in the sample, also was the poorest school with 97.6 percent low income, the highest suspension rate (34 percent of the enrollment), and the highest proportion of classified special education students (24 percent). The other schools in the sample labeled closer to 10 percent of the students as special education. The five sections of eighth grade students saw either two or three different teachers for instruction across their five core academic subjects. This school also introduced a popular after-school tutoring program during the last year of our visits.

Each year, we spoke individually with the sampled students, encouraging them to talk about school. These one-on-one interviews usually took between 30 and 45 minutes, and we recorded the conversations by hand. A general interview protocol, originally developed with input from school staffs, is reproduced in Appendix A. Changes from year to year reflected important issues that emerged from prior analyses. We also tried to take advantage of the interests and concerns students brought up. Thus, the interviews were free-flowing, often resembling a conversation. Results from the interviews conducted during the sixth and seventh grade years have already been published in separate reports (Corbett and Wilson, 1997a; Corbett and Wilson 1997b).

Analysis of the data followed a pattern similar to the first two years. We began by

reading our respective portions of the data, and then shared interpretive memos that discussed emerging themes. We then reread the data to establish categories for coding the data. Based on the first round of coding, we developed initial data displays which led to further interpretive memos and discussions. After several revisions, we arrived at the outline that formed the basis of this report. Each of us then went back to our originally coded data to provide additional examples, filling in the outline.

We also compared students' descriptions of school life in sixth grade with their final year comments to see if perhaps changes had taken place so gradually as to be unremarkable at any one point in time but in fact were more substantial when comparing snapshots from the two vantage points. These comparisons bore out the students' assessments of little change.

In all of the following excerpts from interviews, "I" stands for the interviewer and "S" is the student; the six-digit numbers identify the student, with the first three numbers being the student's unique "ID," the fourth being the grade level the students were in when the study began, the fifth being the student's race (1=African-American; 2=Hispanic; and 3=Other), and the sixth being gender (1=male; 2=female). While inserting these identification codes in the text may be distracting for some readers, their inclusion provides others a means of seeing whether we relied too heavily on a few students for quotes.

Section 3: Change in the Philadelphia Middle Schools — From the Students' View

One of the major purposes of this study was to see if the way students talked about their schools changed significantly over the three-year period. Our hypothesis was that if something important had happened to affect the schools, then it would show up in the students' descriptions of their experiences. Students, however, saw a limited part of the overall educational system. Changes made elsewhere, thus, may not have trickled into the daily flow of students' school lives, at least not over the short-term. Thus, the fact that students noted little that had changed in their middle schools should not be taken to mean that the district had not changed in important ways. However, such a description should be food for thought about what changes would have to be made for students to see a difference in their realm.

"I like the fact that she stays on students. Maybe they parents are not on them. With the teacher encouraging me, it makes me achieve more."

The following section presents students' comments that touched upon change in their plans for the future, in their schools as a whole, and in their classrooms. We found that students still dreamed big. They all planned to go to high school and graduate; most of them expected to go on to college; and nearly all of them anticipated finding employment in their preferred occupational fields. These ideals persisted, and even strengthened, throughout middle school. Indeed, most of the students felt they were well-prepared to meet the challenges ahead. However, we could detect no greater sophistication in their understanding of how these dreams could be realized. For students, working hard, getting good grades, and doing what you were told seemed to be the keys to success at all levels of life. Given the formidable economic and social obstacles that inevitably will confront these children of poverty on their educational and occupational paths, these admirable individual traits would appear to require some elaboration.

At the school level, we found that students were split about whether changes had occurred. About half noted differences during the three years, primarily in terms of academic and behavioral changes in the students themselves. It should be pointed out that not all of the students who described such changes indicated that these developments had been for the better. Students only sporadically singled out organizational and instructional changes they had noticed.

In the classroom, we found that the picture remained essentially the same as in previous years: Students continued to define "good" teachers in the same way and to identify dramatic variations in the types and quality of their experiences from classroom to classroom. Nothing, therefore, had dissuaded them from desiring teachers who were willing to help, strict but nice, and able to explain tasks and content clearly. At the same time, nothing had happened to alter the spotty distribution of such teachers in their schedules.

"A good teacher takes time out to see if all the kids have what they're talking about ... and cares about how they're doing and will see if they need help."

Changes in Plans for the Future

The outside world frequently ascribes a poor appreciation for the value of an education to students of poverty. This was definitely not the case with these young men and women. Almost to the person they talked confidently of their future plans and those plans changed little over the course of their middle school experience. Whether they performed well in school or not, the students left middle school fully convinced of the importance of going to high school and college and of their readiness to tackle those challenges.

Objective measures of their schools' effectiveness to the contrary, students almost universally affirmed that they were well-prepared for high school. Indeed, 82 percent (79 of 96 asked the question) gave a thumbs up to their middle school preparation.

Only a few argued definitively that they were not prepared. The remaining ones equivocated. When pressed, this latter group most often qualified their feelings by indicating that some of their teachers had done a good job while others had not – not a surprising finding when given students' comments about their varied instructional experiences.

Impressive, too, was the continued high numbers of students who suggested that they would be going on to college. Nine out of every ten students we interviewed (106 of 117) talked about the need for some post-secondary training. This number remained remarkably constant over the course of our three years of conversations with these same students.

A good teacher to me is a teacher who is patient, willing to accept the fact that she might be dealing with students who have problems.

These students' ambitious aspirations for higher education were equally matched by their ideas about a future occupation. They continued to think positively about their futures, and all but a few students had specific ideas about what kind of work they would like to do as adults. The vast majority of their vocational aspirations require higher education, so that at a minimum their educational and work goals were consistent. The two most frequently mentioned occupations were doctor (n=26) and professional athlete (n=26). The former was predominantly mentioned by females while the latter was mostly males. There were also 18 aspiring lawyers and 15 cosmetologists, many of whom wanted to own their own business. While not as frequently mentioned, students also talked about being teachers, writers, entertainers, computer specialists, and trades people. There was little difference across the five middle schools in the range or popularity of vocations.

Despite three years of modest academic performance in middle school, students remained steadfast in their perspectives about their futures. The vast majority of the students were still mentioning the same occupations in the eighth grade as they did in the sixth grade. Even the minority that shifted their goals did not necessarily

do so in ways that would require less formal education. Of those who changed their minds about their life's work, they were just as likely to pick a job that required more training (e.g. secretary to writer or athlete to engineer) or equal training (e.g. office worker to barber or teacher to nurse) as they were to shift into occupations with less demanding educational requirements (e.g. veterinarian to athlete or nurse to cosmetologist).

Students clearly articulated the value of getting a high school education and college education. On the other hand, their notions about what they would have to do to obtain this education continued to be simplistic and general. They either had little idea about what it would take or they fell back on the explanations they had offered in the past: working hard, getting good grades, and staying out of trouble. What seemed to be missing in their descriptions were any specific ideas about how to put those plans into action.

> Sometimes a teacher don't understand what people go through. They need to have compassion. A teacher who can relate to students will know when something's going on with them.

S: I still want to go to college.
I: What will it take for you to get to college?
S: (shrugs) I don't know.
I: What do your teachers tell you?
S: They say it good to go to college. (356612)

Sure I'm gonna finish high school. I have all the qualities – I have confidence in myseif and I know I can be anybody. For me, if I try my best, I can do it. (157612)

It takes hard work to finish college. (261611)

I don't want a bad life. I want to finish high school and college. I can do that by keeping up my grades and working hard. (369612)

I'm going to finish high school. To do that, you gotta try hard, really pay attention, or else you won't get the education you need. (467612)

We do not mean to diminish the value of students espousing a "do my best" philosophy. However, their answers seemed overly simplistic solutions to a complex issue. This was especially true given the fact that many of them had admittedly not done their best to date.

When asked whether or not they thought they were "on track" to accomplish all they wanted to do (i. e., college and high status occupations), students were generally quite candid about the need to make some adjustments to their current habits.

S: I'm going to high school and college.
I: Think you will finish both?
S: Yep.
I: What will it take?
S: Good grades.
I: How are your grades now?
S: They're bad, but I'm trying to pull them up.
I: Is that hard to do?
S: I just haven't felt like doing it. (470622)

Just over half of them (generally the ones with lower performance in school) talked about specific changes they would need to make. Students talked about the whats, hows, and whys of changing their approach.

I: Are you on track to meet your goals?
S: No. I need to study more.
I: How do you know that?
S: I just know by some of my grades. [mostly Cs]
I: Why do you think you will be more inclined to do it in high school?
S: I don't want to get let back. I want to go to college.
I: What will you need to do to get better grades?

S: Just do more and more work. I can rest when the school year is over. (123612)

I: Are you on track to accomplish your goals?
S: No, I need to make some changes.
I: What kind of changes?
S: I need to get a better report card. I need to get on the honor roll.
I: What do you need to do to do that?
S: I need to work harder and pass my tests.
I: How do you plan on doing that?
S: I am going to spend more time studying.
I: Why do you think you might take school more seriously in high school than in middle school?
S: Cause I want to stay on the honor roll. In high school, it makes you feel good to be on the honor roll because not many [students] are.
I: Are you confident you can get on the honor roll?
S: Yes, because I stayed on the honor roll in elementary [but not in middle school]. (206612)

I: Are you on track to accomplish your goals?
S: No. I need to make some adjustments.
I: Like what?
S: My grades could be better [this is a C student]. I tend to slack off with my friends. Next year I plan to concentrate and focus. My grades will be better.
I: Why are you going to change next year?
S: I just made a promise to myself. I won't let it [getting into trouble] happen. We were in a bloody fight three weeks ago in the lunchroom.
I: Why did you get in the fight?
S: Most of my friends transferred out.
I: What are you going to do differently next year?
S: I plan to be by myself more, concentrate on my goals, and achieve. (211611)

The somewhat unsettling part of this story was the widespread conviction that it would be a very simple matter to turn over a new leaf in high school. Despite poor to average performance and/or less than exemLlary social behavior in middle school, most of these students were eternally optimistic that things would be different in high school. What made this disconcerting was both the strong quantitative evidence that these students undoubtedly will perform considerably worse in high school (Furstenberg, Neild, & Weiss, 1998), and the repeated warnings by current teachers that high school teachers will be considerably less tolerant of students' shortcomings.

> *[My teacher] says the high school teachers aren't going to care and keep you [to help you with extra work if you don't understand]. If you don't do the work, they won't holler at you. They just put an F down. (111611)*

> *Our teacher says that when in high school they won't take any past due assignments like we do. You need to turn things in on time. (126611)*

> *The teachers won't help you as much. You are more on your own. You have lots of work and projects to do. (418622)*

> *In high school they won't take all our fooling around. They are more stricter. They only give you a certain amount of time to get to class. You do your work or you fail. (505611)*

So the bottom line was that students had changed little in their plans for the future. This was good news in that students were optimistic about their futures, contradicting media and academic portrayals of the apathy and despair associated with urban youth. But there was also bad news. Their optimism about the ease with which they could adjust their performance and behavior in high school seemed misplaced. In fact, current research shows that 58 percent of freshman in Philadelphia high schools fail at least one course as compared to only 36 percent of eighth graders (Furstenberg,

Neild, & Weiss, 1999). In that discouraging environment, the students will begin to come face-to-face with the reality of the limits on their post-secondary plans.

Changes in the Schools

Students also reflected about ways in which their schools changed. Those conversations began with students comparing the school's status from the previous to the current year. Three out of five students whom we talked to about changes (80 of 135) thought some change had taken place, although "change" did not necessarily mean "better."

Changes generally fell into two categories: students having to do more or harder work, and students behaving differently than in previous years. More than a third (29 of 80) of the students who thought changes had taken place felt that they were doing more work than in previous years and/or doing harder work. There were two reasons consistently offered for this. The first argument was simply a function of being in eighth grade; it was time for students to get ready for high school.

> *I: Are things at school different or the same when compared to last year?*
> *S: They are a little different. This is the year that really counts for high school.*
> *I: What are you doing this year?*
> *S: The things we do are not just eighth grade work.*
> *I: How do you know?*
> *S: The books are more advanced. The work is more challenging. It is just not that easy. (221612)*

> *I: Is the work different or the same when compared to last year?*
> *S: It's different. It's harder. [The teacher] says she is teaching us stuff for high school.*
> *I: How do you know it's high school work?*
> *S: She tells us it is. (413622)*

I: Are you learning mostly the same or new things this year?
S: I'm learning mostly new things. They are getting us ready for high school. They are helping us learn what to expect.
I: Like what?
S: Like how to write essays and how to do notetaking. (503612)

The other reason for doing more work, particularly for students in one of the buildings, was that the teachers and administrators were pushing them to work more than had been the case in previous years. In some instances, this was just another way of saying that the eighth grade was regarded by all as the time to get serious, but in one building, this sense of needing to work was perhaps more than coincidentally related to the institution of a school-wide, after-school extra help and activity program.

At School #5 teachers shared the responsibility of staying after school on a regularly scheduled basis to provide additional tutoring and instruction. Of the 20 students who made more than a passing reference to the program, not one dismissed it as unhelpful. Nearly two-thirds of the students (13 of 20) made an effort to attend, and of those who did not, only one hid behind the excuse that he did not know the schedule: *"I need it most for math, but I don't know which days [math is taught] or which classroom it is in." (511611)* The other six either had an alternative program they attended, had their own private tutor, were needed to deliver a younger sibling home from elementary school, or had a parent fearful of that student walking home after dark. When asked why this program was started, several students noted that "the principal knew a lot of kids were failing."

> It made me feel more comfortable, knowing that I'd be able to know the work. See, at first, I didn't like her subject. At first, I didn't do no work. I thought it like any other class where the teacher would not make sure you know what you're doing. But my teacher was like "you want a F, you want a F?" She kept getting on me. I like that.

The program routine was highly structured. Students noted that it was much more organized than an occasional, casual visit to a teacher.

> *S: You go to the library after school (at 3PM). All the teachers are waiting for you there [actually teachers took turns depending on the day of the week]. You then go and do school work in the classroom.*
> *I: What kind of work do you do?*
> *S: The teacher helps you with your class work. The whole point of it is to keep you from failing.*
> *I: What do you do next?*
> *S: At 4:45 you go to the cafeteria to get a snack. Then we go to the gym and we get to exercise from 5 to 6.*
> *I: How many students are involved?*
> *S: About half of the school. (508611)*

The students had to stay for the full time and were not allowed to wander around the building at any time. The school wanted the students to know they were there to work.

The students went for different reasons, some because they were struggling in a subject and needed the extra help:

> *S: I go every day, or at least three times a week. I go for math, English, and computers. . . . I was doing bad (Ds and Fs) in the beginning, but now I am getting Bs and Cs.*
> *I: Why do you think you are getting better grades?*
> *S: I started doing the work, you know, completing the assignments.*
> *I: What prompted you to complete the work?*
> *S: I wanted to get out of here. (508611)*

Others went simply because they really enjoyed the topic and/or found the teacher someone they liked working with:

> *S: I go about three times a week.*

I: Why do you go?
S: To help me learn computers. I do stuff I didn't know how to do.
I: Is that helpful to you?
S: Yeah, I have learned new stuff and the teacher helped me. (531612)

S: I go on Monday and Tuesday. I go because of [teacher's name]. I like the way she teaches math. We are studying algebra [not something they do in the regular class].
I: How many students come to the class?
S: About 15 kids. You know, anyone can come. We just do algebra from about 3:15 to 4:45. (501612)

The key to success of the after-school program, according to students, was that the atmosphere was more conducive to learning. The students were not as distracted as they were in their regular classrooms and as a result felt that they could put more effort into their work.

Students are more serious [after school]. They don't got no friends to look at 'em. That way they can work harder. (555611)

I: Is the after-school program you mentioned a good idea?
S: Mmhmm.
I: Why?
S: It help you a whole lot. It brought my grades back up.
I: How?
S: It help me understand.
I: How many students are there in one class?
S: Only 6 or 7 and that helps a lot.
I: Why?
S: When it's small, you don't have that much people talking, or the teacher banging that stick, so you can go through the work better.
I: Do you wish your regular classes were like this?
S: Yes, everyone talk too much sometimes. (573612)

I got a F in math first report. So I started going to the after-school, and I got a D the second report. Now, I got Cs, Bs, and As. When you with friends, you laugh and play. This program helps me understand better what we doing. (553612)

Whatever the reason for their attendance, this program provided an important option for a significant number of students to learn content and study skills that had eluded them during the regular school day.

In noting other changes in their schools, students frequently mentioned changes in student behavior. Most of their comments addressed a tightening of the rules or the fact that there was increased security in the building. Despite the effort by the schools to more aggressively deal with disruptive students in the school, students were mixed about how effective those changes were. Some suggested that it improved the general climate of the school, while others said that implementation was spotty and ineffective.

I: Are things different or the same this year at school?
S: They're different?
I: How are they different?
S: We got to follow harder rules.
I: Like what?
S: No fighting, no running in the halls, be quieter in the lunchroom.
I: Are kids better?
S: Yeah, they are better behaved. (412621)

S: They've added some extra rules.
I: Like what?
S: If you fight, you get locked up and you can't hang around after 3:30 cause of all the fights.
I: Do the stricter rules work?
S: No.

I: Why not?
S: The NTAs (Non-Instructional Teaching Assistants) don't put more effort into it. At first it worked, but now they just take you to the Dean. (327612)

I: Have there been fewer fights with the new rules?
S: No. They say they will arrest you, but they (students) come right back to class.
I: Are students better behaved?
S: No. (309611)

A major portion of the reform effort in the middle schools during the three years had to do with reorganization in small learning communities (SLC). In these, a group of students rotated among a team of teachers, giving both teachers and students the opportunity to know a subsection of the school well. Overall, students rarely commented on this development, possibly because middle schools had begun using a team and/or house concept before the onset of the SLC nomenclature. Indeed, the students made few, if any, observations that could be directly linked to any of the ten goals of *Children Achieving* that were listed at the beginning of this report.

> Some teachers don't care if you act up. Some teachers can't teach. Like if you talking, they won't teach. They let you talk. And then some punish the whole class for one person talking. That's not right.

To see if a general question about change was too vague to spur concrete student perceptions of change, we explored the idea of the SLC with a sub-sample. Their experiences seemed to vary by school, although they clearly associated rather minor alterations in the school routine with them and were mixed about whether this reorganization was for the better.

For two of the schools (#1 and #5), students talked about their SLC mostly in the context of field trips that they took. Depending on their SLC, some students reported

taking considerably more trips, while others lamented only being outside the building once or twice during the year. In a third school (#4), there was almost no mention of the SLC other than to suggest that they attended assemblies based on their SLC assignment. The fourth school (#2) had undergone a recent reorganization and what captured most of the students' attention was the fact that now they were organized together with students from different grade levels for SLC activities. Students were split on the wisdom of such a move; about half thought it brought fewer fights and more order to the school, while the other half found the younger students immature and were unwilling to interact constructively. School #3 organized itself around a group of seven different SLCs, each with a different occupational focus (e.g., hotel and restaurant; law and government; performing arts; etc.). Students reported more activities related to these occupational themes than the other schools. For example, one group went on a field trip to learn how a hotel operated, another group performed a stage production for a local senior citizens group, and a third group used the content of law and government to help articulate instruction across their major subjects.

The above discussion does not give an overwhelming sense of change in the middle schools. Remember a sizable portion of the students (40 percent) could describe none at all. Of course, students spent the majority of their time in classrooms. The next section therefore looks more closely at their depictions of those settings.

Changes in Classroom Experiences

Students' views of what they wanted their teachers to be like remained constant over the three years. As we reported in 1996, students valued teachers who were willing to help, strict – but nice, and able to explain assignments, concepts, and tasks clearly. Students the first year noted these attributes in equal proportion. Those distributions remained consistent this year, although we will explain later that being strict really had two components: maintaining order in the classroom and pushing students to complete their school work.

More impressive than the fact that so many students made similar comments was

that they made them so often. Offering help when needed, being strict, and explaining well were extensively embedded in the interviews. One or more of these qualities would crop up in numerous places: when students defined a good teacher, offered advice for improving the school, named their favorite classes and explained why, described the daily routines in classes, identified how they learned best, and – perhaps most significantly – compared classrooms in which they learned and behaved to those in which they did not. Students were emphatic in their support of teachers who approximated the ideal, and pleaded for the schools to do something about the others.

"I prefer discussions mostly. You get more out of it. The more talk we have together, the more we go over things, the more we learn. If you have an experiment and don't have a discussion about it, you wouldn't know what you're doing."

Students' voices were so unanimous and even profound in this regard that we reserve much of the presentation of these findings to the fifth section on "Classrooms Students Want." But it is worth offering a brief summary at this point about what students meant by these terms.

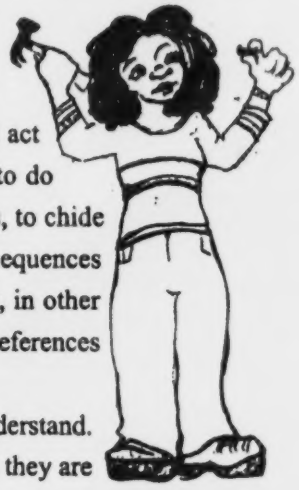
A teacher's being willing to help meant that the teacher would find a way for the student to get continued explanations of a concept, problem, or assignment until the student understood it. Help might take several forms: simply responding to a students' question in front of the entire class; visiting students individually at their desks as they worked on an assignment; suggesting that students with questions "ask three before me" as a way of getting them to view one another as resources; allowing students to work on a task in groups; and being available at non-class times – before school, after school, or during lunchtime. Different students preferred different ways of getting help, depending upon shyness or unwillingness to admit they were having a problem.

The important point was that the help had to result in the students' understanding.

Students praised the teacher who "makes sure that I got it," who "makes sure I understand," who "teaches me so I can do it," who "makes it easier to understand," who "makes it clear," who will "actually teach." That was the sole criterion of effectiveness.

This meant that the teacher not only had to be willing to help but also had to be good at explaining. A teacher could be adept at providing explanations in several ways, according to students. First, the teacher would break the concept, problem, or assignment down, and teach it sequentially "step by step." Second, the teacher would use alternative ways of presenting the material. As examples, students talked about teachers who could tell them what to do and then would also "show" them what to do. They applauded teachers who "switch the ways" of explaining and who go over the explanation more than once, using a slightly different variation each time. One student concluded simply that the teacher had to "teach the way we understand." Finally, students described a teacher as good at explaining if they were able to "translate" the material into language more familiar to the students. "Tell me in my own words," more than one student advised.

Then, to succeed, from the student perspective, teachers had to ignore students' disinterest in the class, their reluctance to tackle a task, and their frequent off-task behavior and teach them anyway. Students did not mean teachers should overlook such behavior. What they meant was that a teacher could not let such actions defeat him or her. Students said they wanted to learn; they just did not act like it. It fell to the teacher to continually stay on them to do otherwise. Thus, the teacher needed to admonish students, to chide their misbehavior, and to provide fair and appropriate consequences whenever students went too far. Teachers had to be strict, in other words, even in the face of student complaints and apparent preferences to the contrary.



Help until students understand. Explain in the ways they understand. Stay on students until the finish what they now understand they are

to do. Students reserved the highest of praise for the teachers who acted like this. Students proclaimed that these were the teachers who "do they job," "teach," "care about us," and "make us learn." These were the teachers students wanted to have.

Such teachers, however, were not evenly distributed throughout the schools. To the contrary, these discussions often arose in the context of students describing classes in which they did not learn. One of the primary issues raised in our 1997 report was the abundance of situations in which students tended to fall through instructional cracks in the classroom floors. Major contributors to this problem were the heavy reliance in these schools on long-term substitutes, some of whom may have not been adequately prepared for these classrooms and all of whom students regarded as not "regular teachers," and a host of regular teachers whom students identified as "unable to control the class." None of the schools was immune to the problem.

This year's data regarding classroom experiences were similar. Every student was able to identify some teacher he or she had during the year that approximated the above qualities. Thus, at some point in the school day, the student found a setting in which learning took place. Unfortunately, nearly every student could contrast this setting to others in which little learning, if any, occured. This was the case in all five of the schools.

Summary

Overall, the preceding discussion suggests that little actually changed during the students' three years in middle school. Significant change, of course, takes time, and it may be that the effects of what the District has done to date will be realized down the road. Also, it may be that students were simply poor informants about change; after all they had little basis for comparison. Thus, the above discussion should not be considered an unabashed indictment of the District's accomplishments over the time period.

Nevertheless, in the students' descriptions of what they knew best – the classroom

— there lay an unavoidable message. Within and across schools, students did not experience a similar curriculum or pedagogy, nor did they have equal access to the same quality of teaching. It is improbable that any claims of reform progress will have either credibility or staying power until it can be demonstrated that the quality of education in one classroom and in one school is essentially the same as in another classroom or school, and that the level of quality is steadily improving.

The one conclusion that seems reasonable to draw from this is that *Children Achieving* had not yet thoroughly and consistently penetrated the day-to-day lives of students. This criticism should not not be uniquely applied to Children Achieving. It is a constant companion of reform throughout the United States. But "pockets of success" do not breed "success for all"; and "success for some" only entrenches the historically inequitable distribution of high quality educational experiences for urban youth.

This next section portrays in detail the nature of these differences and their effects on students.

Section 4: Pedagogical, Content, and Classroom Environment Differences Within and Across The Five Schools

The students' comments about themselves, their schools, and their teachers touched on aspects of their education that should be reasonably sensitive to reforms intended to affect the core processes of schooling. One hopes that indications of the lack of a major effect only reflected the relative newness of the District's ambitious agenda at the time of the students' interviews. One persistent thread running through students' descriptions, however, seems to us to be particularly worthy of immediate consideration, even at this early point in the reform process. The students' pointed depictions of dramatic instructional differences as they moved from classroom to classroom suggest that there was an embedded and endemic unevenness to the schools' instructional programs that seriously dampened progress on improving students' academic performance.

There were at least three types of differences contained in the student interviews. One type concerned **pedagogical** differences across teachers. Some teachers in a building preferred one means of instruction over another. Despite the overwhelming persuasiveness of the literature on learning styles and multiple intelligences, some teachers still opted to rely on teaching strategies that were more suited to one style or intelligence than another, rather than building multiple strategies into lessons. The consequence was that such differences had varied meanings for students in the class, with some being satisfied and others frustrated with a specific teacher.

A second type of instructional difference was with the **content** of the class. While the District has curriculum frameworks, established scope and sequences for each subject and grade level do not exist. Teachers pick and choose what to emphasize in day-to-day lessons. Therefore, students in one class ended the year expert in certain areas while students in the same grade but having a different teacher developed skills and knowledge in another aspect of the same subject.

To be sure, pedagogical and content variations affected student learning. In these classrooms, learning issues revolved around what content students encountered and how much content individual students grasped. The third type of difference was more stark; this comparison was between classrooms where learning took place versus those where students asserted very little learning occurred at all. These **classroom environment** differences had little to do with gradations of individuals' acquisition of knowledge; instead they referred to whether the majority of students learned anything at all. Either because a class was incessantly disruptive or a teacher was reluctant to go back over previously introduced material or both, students in each school described situations in which little, if any, learning took place at any point in the school year.

This section looks at each of these instructional differences in turn. Every one of the students in the study reported on pedagogical differences, not necessarily with complaint. On the other hand, individual students were rarely in a situation that enabled them to comment on content differences within the same subject in a school, but collectively the students in each of the five schools did so. Nearly every student had firsthand experience with the third type of instructional difference at some point in their three-year sojourn in middle school.

Pedagogical Differences – The Case of Science

In each of the five buildings, students who took a particular subject from one teacher described an entirely different approach to teaching from students who had another teacher for the same subject. Nowhere was this difference more noticeable than in science classes.

Current science standards emphasize student problem-solving abilities, which include formulating problems themselves and designing investigations to shed light on possible answers. This inquiry-centered approach emphasizes hands-on activities that enable students to test predictions. Students in each school described great variation in how often they were able to engage hands-on activities. Some students

had few opportunities to do hands-on activities and described instructional practices where everything was organized for them and the focus was on learning important facts. Others did experiments and projects, but all the procedures and steps were clearly spelled out. There were only a few cases where students were challenged to think about underlying principles and construct alternative experiments that would allow them to test explanations.

Characteristic of the more traditional approach to science were the following student descriptions:

> *I: What do you do in science?*
> *S: Mostly we work out of the text.*
> *I: What kinds of things are you studying?*
> *S: We are studying earthquakes and volcanoes.*
> *I: What kinds of things do you do with the text book?*
> *S: We do vocabulary. We read the chapter and get the vocabulary words. After each section in the book we do a section review.*
> *I: Do you do experiments?*
> *S: No, but sometimes we do reports. (101631)*

> *S: We read in the text book and then we take notes. We also answer questions from the "check and explain" part of the book.*
> *I: Do you do experiments?*
> *S: Not that often. We did a couple this year. (300611)*

Occasionally students would report on doing more hands-on activities, but those were often quite structured activities:

> *S: We have been doing projects on the planets. We need to get the facts and draw a picture.*
> *I: Where do you go to get your facts?*
> *S: I go to the library and copy things out of a book. (136612)*

S: We do lots of projects.
I: Can you give me an example?
S: Yeah, I did a project on acid rain.
I: What did you do?
S: I did some research and wrote a report. (312611)

S: We had to do science fair projects even if we didn't enter the science fair.
I: How did you know what to do?
S: [The teacher] just gave us lists of what we needed to do. (522611)

It was the rare exception where students described more open-ended activities where they were actively engaged in deciding what they would do and how they would go about it:

S: We do a lot of group projects.
I: How often do you do these?
S: Two or three a month.
I: What kinds of things are you doing?
S: We just did a model on the phases of the moon.
I: Did your teacher tell you what to do?
S: No, we had to figure out our roles by ourselves. (329612)

S: We are doing a garden project (in the school courtyard). We had to figure out what we were going to plant and we had to describe the plants we wanted to plant. We also do experiments that we make up on our own. (332612)

These different approaches appeared simultaneously in the same school. For example, in School #2, one teacher relied heavily on the textbook, copying notes, and completing chapter reviews (Teacher #2-A), whereas the person's colleague concentrated on hands-on activities and experiments (Teacher #2-B).

I: What do you do in science class?
S: We know we have to write. Teacher #2-A always has three boards of stuff. Teacher #2-A be writing with us. It often takes the whole period.
I: Do you do anything else?
S: Sometimes we read. Sometimes we do worksheets or projects. (209611)

S: We get 3 to 5 minutes to get ready. Then we copy notes from the board. Next we open the text and discuss what we have been reading and what notes we have taken.
I: How long do you spend doing each of these?
S: About 20 to 25 minutes writing notes and 15 to 20 minutes discussing. (211611)

S: Most of the time we write notes from the board. We usually have three blackboards of notes. It takes about 30 minutes. After 30 minutes, Teacher #2-A starts going over it. He goes to the text book and shows us his way and the book way.
I: Do you do experiments?
S: Yeah, but we haven't done any for a long time - since March or April (interviewed in June).
I: What else do you do?
S: We do lots of tests, most every Friday. He prefers long answers to his questions (as opposed to multiple choice or true/false questions). (225611)

In contrast to working with notes and text book materials, a group of students, from another class down the hall, described their experience as primarily being hands-on experiments and projects:

I: What do you do in science class?
S: We mostly do science projects.
I: How often?
S: A lot!

I: Can you remember some examples?
S: We did rocket engines, we wrote about the greenhouse effect, and we tested how many drops of water fit on a coin.
I: Do you use your textbook much?
S: Not as much as we do projects. (205612)

S: All we do is experiments and projects. We study procedure and hypothesis.
I: Do you use your textbook much?
S: Not really. It's just in our book bag most of the time. Sometimes we do homework in it. (207612)

S: We mostly do projects.
I: Can you give me an example?
S: I just finished a science fair poster on hard and soft water. Also, at the beginning of the year we did reports on black scientists.
I: How did you know who to do a report on?
S: Teacher #2-B gave us a list and we got to pick from the list.
I: Do you use the text book much?
S: No, not much. We usually just talk about what's in the textbook.
I: Is that helpful?
S: I like it better than just reading and taking notes. (223611)

These varied science experiences in School #2 were also documented in the other schools. For example, all of the students in School #1 reported spending a good deal of time reading from the text and copying notes from the board. But at the same time, they also reported quite a range of working on experiments – some did no experiments and only a few projects, while others said they did mostly projects and experiments.

S: We outline the chapter.
I: Who creates the outline?
S: The teacher do it and we copy it. Sometimes we do it on our own.
I: What else do you do?

S: We answer questions from the end of the chapter.
I: Do you do experiments?
S: No, not many. We did some at the beginning of the year. (105612)

I: What are you doing in science?
S: We are working on fossils and we are also studying weather maps. That's fun cause we get to act like we are weather reporters and the teacher video-taped us.
I: Do you do experiments?
S: Yeah. We're working on one now with fossils.
I: How about projects?
S: We have been doing some weather forecasting. (111611)

In School #5 all but two of the students talked about being preoccupied with doing their science fair projects (we were in the school just before they were due). Most students said they had been working on them for two or three months. When they were not working on science fair projects, students reported spending almost all of their time reading from the text, copying notes, and answering questions. There was little or no mention of experiments, apart from the science fair.

I: What have you been doing in science?
S: We have been learning about the stars and the planets.
I: How do you learn about that?
S: We read about it in the text book and the teacher explains it. We do worksheets and then we do the section review in the book.
I: Do you do many experiments?
S: No, just about two. But we did just finish our science fair projects. Everyone had to do one. (501612)

Content Differences – The Case of English

Just as there are standards about quality science instruction, in English the emphasis on understanding the writing process is a key element of what students are expected to know and be able to do. So, in addition to being exposed to different kinds of writing activities, students encountered divergent definitions of what it meant to be a good writer. What they learned about writing varied from students who claimed their teachers had no rules for writing, to those who focused on writing details like punctuation, capitalization, and indentation, to those who used process definitions referring to beginning, middle, and conclusion or getting across the main point with supporting examples.

Here is a sampling of comments from students who saw no particular rules for producing a quality piece of writing.

> *I: Do you do much writing in your English class?*
> *S: No, we don't do that much.*
> *I: How do you know if you have written a quality piece of work when you are writing?*
> *S: The teacher just looks it over and she says it's good. (102612)*

> *I: Are there any special steps you need to follow when writing a good essay?*
> *S: No, not really. Sometimes the teacher might give us a story to get us started. We just need to listen to the teacher's instructions, jot down notes, and go home and study. (303611)*

> *I: Do you know what it takes to write a good essay?*
> *S: No, she [teacher] don't tell us. (401621)*

> *I: Do you do much writing?*
> *S: Yes, once in a blue moon.*
> *I: What kinds of things do you write?*
> *S: Poems, short stories, definitions.*

I: Do you know what it takes to get an A?
S: Yeah, we have rules, but I don't know them off hand. (508611)

Others suggested that quality derived from proper punctuation or grammar:

I: What does it take to write a good essay.
S: If I do what she taught me. You know, it has to have good grammar, the sentences have to be right - complex ones are better, the punctuation has to be good, and the sentences have to make sense. You can't have no sentence fragments or run-ons. (104612)

I: How do you know if you have written a good essay in language arts?
S: If it's neat, has no mistakes, and has what she wants. (226612)

I: How often do you write?
S: Every day!
I: What kinds of things do you write.
S: Notes off the board.
I: When you write your own sentences are there any special steps you follow to make sure it is good quality?
S: Yeah, we have the steps on the wall. You have to capitalize, make sure you have periods, punctuation must be right, and you have to write neatly. (309611)

Yet others, when they spoke of writing, focused more on a process that involved revision and refinement while moving toward a finished product.

S: You have to write the right stuff.
I: How do you know if you have the right stuff?
S: You have to write lots and you have to correct it after you do the first draft.
I: Who helps you with the revisions?
S: The students do sometimes, but mostly the teacher. (125611)

I: How do you know if you have written a good essay in language arts?
S: She has samples of good writing in the room, so I know if mine is good. (221612)

I: Are there steps you follow in preparing a good essay?
S: Yes. You need to first make a rough draft. Then you need to revise it. Next you need to write a final draft. And then you have to publish it.
I: Do you do much writing?
S: Yes, a lot. Mostly every day. (310611)

I: Do you have any guidelines for writing?
S: Yes. First, you need to think about it. Then you need to write a rough draft. After that you need to proof it. Finally you do a regular draft.
I: Does you teacher ever have you redo a regular draft?
S: Yes, He'll hand it back and have us redo it.
I: Do you prefer that?
S: Yes. They can make sure I do it right. If they know I can do better, I want someone who will push me. (327612)

The five schools also had contrasting emphases with writing. By way of example, students at School #3 encountered a large number of different English teachers. "Writing," in the students' minds, ranged from maintaining a journal every day, to constructing work for their portfolio, to creative and narrative writing, to filling in the blanks, doing worksheets, and answering questions from the book. Only a handful of students made any mention of the writing process with one of them only vaguely remembering that "there were steps on the wall."

I: How often do you write?
S: Every day.
I: What do you write about?
S: Mostly we just write notes off of the board. (309611)

I: What about writing in English class?
S: We have paragraphs with blank spaces and we have to write in the missing words. We also have to answer questions and write paragraphs.
I: Do you write essays or journal entries?
S: No, not in English. Only in social studies. (332612)

I: How often do you write in English class?
S: Every day.
I: What kind of writing do you do?
S: Mostly just answering questions from the text book.
I: Are there any special steps you follow when you are writing?
S: No, just as long as you know what you're doing, [you'll get a good grade]. (322612)

I: How often are you writing in English class?
S: Every day. We write in our journal.
I: What kinds of things do you write about?
S: If I could pick my high school of choice, what would it be and why? We are also collecting all of our narrative essays into a writing portfolio. We are attaching a cover sheet to each sample explaining why we chose it and what we learned from it. (300611)

For the students at School #4, writing included taking notes and doing worksheets. There was an occasional mention of writing essays and about one-third of the students talked about writing in journals. Several students also mentioned a current writing project where they were working on career activities - employment applications, resumes, letters of employment, etc.

S: In English we are mostly working on projects.
I: What project are you working on now?
S: We are learning how to do a work application — filling out forms, getting letters and references from our family.
I: Do you do much writing in this class?
S: Mostly vocabulary words — writing sentences and definitions.

I: Do you do many essays?
S: No, not much. (401621)

S: We do a lot of things from the text book or from the newspaper. We do questions from the newspaper and write a paragraph.
I: What does it take to write a good paragraph?
S: It has to have eight lines, the right words need to be capitalized, and no misspelled words.
I: Does your teacher have you redo poorly written paragraphs?
S: Only if we have misspelled words. (414622)

As a final example, most of the students at School #5 reported that writing involved copying notes, answering questions, writing sentences or doing spelling words. Only a quarter of the students mentioned either writing poetry or creating their own stories/ essays.

I: How often do you write in English class?
S: Every day.
I: What kinds of things are you writing?
S: We copy notes from the board and we do dictionary work. We also answer questions from our workbook.
I: Do you ever write your own stories?
S: No. (503612)

I: How about writing?
S: We do that more than reading. We do lots of that for homework, especially unpunctuated sentences. We mostly learn stuff from elementary school — like punctuation.
I: Do you write anything else?
S: Sometimes we will write short stories. (505611)

I: How often are you writing in your English class?
S: Every day.
I: What kinds of things are you writing?
S: We answer questions from the book and we take notes. Maybe once or twice a month we will write our own stories or essays.

I: What does it take to get an A on a writing assignment?
S: You need to get punctuation right. You can't have any grammatical errors. You also need to know how to explain it. You have to have it in the right order. (522611)

There was no doubt that teachers in all five buildings were putting an emphasis on student writing. However, what it meant to write well in the context of individual classrooms varied tremendously. Thus, while most students were learning to write, they were often learning something entirely different from peers within and across the five buildings.

Classroom Environment Differences – Three Examples

Last year we described in detail classrooms where there were "cracks in the classroom floor" caused either by a revolving door of substitute teachers, disruptive students who forced teachers to deal with behavior at the expense of instruction, or support scarce classrooms where students didn't get the repeated explanations or extra help they were calling for. We heard similar stories this year, although the examples were as prevalent among regular teachers as interim ones. From the students' perspective, the environment was such that pedagogy and content did not really matter because nothing went on instructionally. Interestingly, the same students could describe a comparable setting where teachers fostered markedly different environments.

We offer three examples. In two of the cases it is the same students encountering different teachers, and in the third it is different students experiencing markedly different environments in the same content area.

In School #1, the students had two teachers for their core academic subjects. The two worked together as a teaching team. In most cases one teacher handled math and science while the second one taught social studies and language arts, with both of them sharing the same groups of students.

This was the case with a group of students who saw their social studies/language arts teacher (#1-A) as someone they could learn from and relate to well, while they seemed to constantly do battle with their other teacher (#1-B), who taught them math/science. One student described #1-B as over-demanding, lacking patience, and not very sensitive to student learning needs, pointing out that students need several different explanations before the concepts sink in. The other teacher seemed to be just the opposite.

> *I: Have you had a good year?*
> *S: Teacher #1-B has an attitude problem. She wants us to be so good the first time. She wants us to always be perfect. She has us walk in a line in the hallway. We are the only class in the school to do that.*
> *I: Why do you think she has you do that?*
> *S: She wants to impress the principal.*
> *I: Is there anything else she does that bothers you?*
> *S: She is the only one (teacher) who won't go over things [help review the work], she never comes in with a smile, she is always evil. By not going over it, we got a bad attitude. I haven't learned nothing in her class. Only three students have, but they were ones who were held back and they all have tutors.*
> *I: Do you mostly cover new material in the class or is it review?*
> *S: Some of it's new. Actually, we do more new stuff as the year goes along. But we stay on something new for only one day. The teacher never goes back over it [as a review or to see if students understand]. All we do is have tests on it [right after we learn it].*
> *I: What do you do in math class [with this teacher]?*
> *S: The teacher teach real fast. The teacher talks fast. If we ask her/him to say it over, he/she has an attitude. The teacher takes out home problems on us.*
> *I: What do you do after the teacher teaches new work?*
> *S: Then we do our homework. But the teacher don't check it. We could cheat and she would never know!*
> *I: How about Teacher #1-A?*
> *S: If we don't get it, he/she will go over it. That teacher is nice.*

I: Do students come in after school for help?
S: Yeah!
I: How many?
S: A lot. We come in for help on Monday and Thursday.
I: How about help from Teacher #1-B?
S: That teacher helps us on Monday and Wednesday, but he/she always has too much to do. We just sit there and read a book.
I: Tell me more about Teacher #1-A?
S: One boy in the class, he do all his work now. If it wasn't for Teacher #1-A he wouldn't do nothing. At the beginning of the year he don't do nothing; now he does. He wouldn't even take the SAT-9s; all he did was just bubbled in the answers [randomly].
I: Why do you think that student is working now?
S: Cause Teacher #1-A took time out to help him and talk to him.
I: How else are your two teachers different?
S: Teacher #1-B puts us down. Teacher #1-A say to us, 'don't drop out.' Teacher #1-B starts us with an F (as our base grade) and expect us to bring it up. Teacher #1-A starts us with an A. Teacher #1-A also has us stay after school until we turn the work in. If we do a bad test, we can retake it 'til we get a good grade. With Teacher #1-B, we don't have retakes. (106612)

The differences between these two teachers is further captured by how they dealt with work that was not turned in on time:

I: How do your teachers deal with work that you don't turn in?
S: Teacher #1-A tells me what is late. . . . Whatever we miss Teacher #1-B just has us sit in our seats after school and checks on us. Teacher #1-A is more willing to help.
I: What does Teacher #1-A do to make the work more understandable?
S: Teacher #1-A puts some of our reading books on tape. And one time we went to 33rd and Sansom where we got to act out a play we were studying (Othello). We also looked at movies and saw how the characters act out the parts.

I: How about Teacher #1-B?
S: At times, Teacher #1-B just say 'don't bother me'. I've told you [the answers] once. Ask your classmates for help. . . .
Teacher #1-B says to call your study buddy. Teacher #1-B don't like to help or care for some people. Teacher #1-B only cares about nice, quiet people who do all their work. (127612)

Perhaps the most significant difference between the two teachers was how they handled students who needed additional help. As noted in the next section of this report, the willingness of a teacher to work with a student until they understood a concept was a highly valued trait.

One of the teachers on this team promoted independence and self-reliance by encouraging students to figure things out for themselves, while the other one offered a support net to hold students up until they could do it on their own:

I: Do you feel like you are prepared for high school?
S: No, I ain't that good in math, but I'm ready in the rest of them.
I: Why are you doing so poorly in math [student admits she is failing]?
S: It's the way the teacher teaches. Teacher #1-B just gives it to us and don't explain it. Teacher #1-B expect us to know it. The kids put their hands up [to ask questions] and Teacher #1-B says put your hand down, you should know it. I haven't seen one report card [from the entire class] with an A or B on it. Teacher #1-B just has us do problems from the book. The teacher calls us up individually and checks 'em. Teacher #1-B just marks 'em wrong and puts your grade in the book.
I: But what if you don't understand? What does the teacher do?
S: Teacher #1-B says to keep trying and gets an attitude. Teacher #1-B starts yelling so everyone just ignores him/her. They [students] go on strike.
I: What happens when you refuse to do the work?
S: Teacher #1-B gives us a detention and call our parents in. Then Teacher #1-B starts bringing up things from the beginning of

the year and we just ignore it.
I: How about Teacher #1-A?
S: We learn a lot.
I: What does Teacher #1-A do that helps you learn?
S: She/he brings us movies and we act things out most every day. She/he makes it fun and don't get an attitude every five minutes. Sometimes we discuss things for a whole hour or so. We also read interesting stuff.
I: Like what?
S: Maya Angelou.
I: Why is that interesting?
S: We read about people fighting, a girl who was raped, things that happen in real life. Teacher #1-A tells us how not to act as a young lady.
I: What happens if you don't understand your work with Teacher #1-A?
S: Teacher #1-A calls us to the desk and spends about 15 minutes with us. If the whole group can't get it, Teacher #1-A will stop the class and explain. Teacher #1-A gives us steps to do it. (129612)

The value of taking time to explain things and making sure that everyone understood was reinforced by another student's comments:

I: Are you getting a good education this year?
S: Not really.
I: Why not?
S: My teacher (Teacher #1-B) just teaches a lesson once. If you ask for help, Teacher #1-B gets an attitude. . . . Teacher #1-B says "I already taught it once, I'm not going to teach it again. You weren't paying attention." Teacher #1-B just teaches too fast and don't take the time to teach it right.
I: Why?
S: Teacher #1-B only wants to teach it once.
I: What about Teacher #1-A?
S: Teacher #1-A takes time and teaches. If you don't understand,

Teacher #1-A takes time to explain.
I: Can you give me an example?
S: In social studies we were doing slave trade. The test we did was different than what we learned [and we didn't get good grades on it].
I: What did the teacher do?
S: Teacher #1-A explained it again and wrote notes for us. I took a retest and went from a D to a C.
I: What else does Teacher #1-A do?
S: Teacher #1-A talks to you about it. Teacher #1-A makes sure you understand and know what you are doing.
I: How does Teacher #1-A do that?
S: Teacher #1-A checks everybody's work and explains it if it is not right.
I: Does Teacher #1-A do that often?
S: Yes. Teacher #1-A do it every day. (136612)

As we noted in last year's report, one of the problems that these students faced was a revolving door of teachers. In this second case where students highlighted differences in their teachers, the most interesting comparison (School #4) was between two different science teachers they had in the same year. With their original teacher, they felt they learned almost nothing, while they were very excited about the replacement. Students did not mince words in portraying how they felt about this. Notice how different the two were portrayed when reaching out to students – the essence of teaching was engaging students in the content rather than just delivering it.

I: Are you learning a lot this year?
S: Not in the beginning. Teacher #4-A (science teacher) just wrote notes on the board. I didn't learn nothing. Now we have Teacher #4-B and we do projects. We have fun. We are learning lots.
I: What happened to the first teacher?
S: I'm not sure, I heard Teacher #4-A got fired. (418622)

I: Have you had a good year?
S: Yeah, I'm learning a lot.
I: How do you know?
S: The teachers give us a lot of work, but I had trouble with one teacher (Teacher #4-A), all Teacher #4-A did was wrote on the board and told us to copy it. Teacher #4-A never taught us anything.
I: What happened to Teacher #4-A?
S: His/her blood pressure went up.
I: How about Teacher #4-B? How is that teacher different?
S: Teacher #4-B tells us what's in the book, has us do questions, and helps us when we get stuck. The first thing Teacher #4-B said when he/she arrived in the class was raise your hand if you need help. (428621)

In the final example (School #5), students offered a significant contrast between two math teachers. Both worked from the text book, putting lots of examples on the board and being careful to explain problems "step-by-step." Both were also advocates for the after-school tutoring program, encouraging students to come for additional help. The difference was in their willingness to try a variety of ways to get a concept across and to stay with a topic until it was understood by everyone.

First, some reactions to the teacher who stays with the class until everyone understands:

I: What kinds of activities help you learn the most?
S: Like in math, T #5-A is always showing us several different ways to do a problem. (505611)

The teacher (#5-A) shows us the work on the board and he/she goes over it until people get it. (514611)

We do problems on the board and then the teacher gives us a practice page to do. T #5-A checks our work. If we don't get it, we do it over. (528612)

And then the reactions to the teacher (#5-B) who was less likely to work with those who did not understand after explaining it once:

> *I: What kinds of things do you do in your math class with T #5-B?*
> *S: We do two things. First, T #5-B talks to the whole class about the lesson for about 15 minutes. Second, we do problems that he puts on the board. That takes about 30 minutes.*
> *I: Does T #5-B help you when you have trouble?*
> *S: He tell you one time. You better pay attention. (508611)*
>
> *I: How are you doing in math?*
> *S: I get As on the tests but I don't do the work and I got suspended.*
> *I: Why?*
> *S: T #5-B don't like being wrong. He/she takes it out on the kids. (522611)*

Summary

This report could end here, a pronouncement of uneven effects to join the litany of similar such assessments of reform. But lack of progress is actually simply a beginning point. Educational reform in Philadelphia has an untapped ally – students. While one only has to walk the school buildings for a brief time to sense the uneasiness and fragility of the relationships between young people and the adults, the potential for an alliance is there. The students in these five middle schools knew what kind of teacher and classroom setting they wanted. They wanted teachers who "stayed on students" to complete assignments, went out of his/her way to provide help, explained things until the "light bulb went on" for the whole class, varied classroom activities, controlled student behavior without ignoring the lesson, and understood students' situations and factored that into their lessons. *Children Achieving* would be hard-pressed to disavow these wishes. In the next section we offer an elaboration of what students meant by these qualities.

Section 5: Classrooms Students Want

The students in our study were among the lowest performing in the city. More of them read below grade level, performed poorly on basic mathematics, and wrote in an unskilled way than did their counterparts in other schools around the city, much less in the suburbs. This specific performance gap on tests is but a mirror of a national trend in which children of poverty score significantly lower on various standardized tests than children of wealth. Numerous explanations for this gap abound, most of which correctly identify that this educational dilemma has deep societal roots.

However, while society changes glacially, children continue to move through their schooling years at a quicker and unyielding pace. Today's students do not have the luxury of waiting for tomorrow's solutions. That is why educational reformers must look inward for strategies to benefit current cohorts of students. Recent thinking by Jencks and Phillips (1998) underscores this necessity. They argue convincingly that the performance gap can be reduced by paying much closer attention to the nature of students' classroom experiences. Dwelling on matters of heredity and background, they claim, is unproductive and, in fact, simply wrong.

"She's mean out of the kindness of her heart. It's for a reason: So we can learn."

Jencks and Phillips are not too far behind Philadelphia's middle school students' thinking in this regard. For the last three years, the students filled the interviews with descriptions of classroom situations that helped and hindered their learning. These descriptions were consistent and compelling about what kinds of classroom experiences would best prepare them for the futures they desired. Indeed, the students were absolutely positive that they and their peers could succeed well in certain classroom environments.

Students did not want teachers to find excuses to not teach them, to leave a student alone just because he/she chose not to participate, or to let students decide on their own to work or not. They did not want teachers who failed to find the time to provide extra help. They did not want teachers to quit explaining something to someone just because the task or problem had already been explained several times before. They did not want teachers to give in to disruptions to the exclusion of instruction. They did not want teachers who ignored students' problems or who taught content devoid of meaning in students' daily lives. They did not want teachers who expected little of them.

Most of us don't get it the first time. Teacher #1-A will explain how to do it 'til we understand. It don't seem like the class drag on; this teacher teach a good lesson. We correct all our mistakes, even if it's a test, even if the grade is going in the book. Regardless, Teacher #1-A say you can learn.

Instead, students wanted to be in classrooms where:

- the teacher "stayed on students" to complete assignments;
- the teacher went out of his/her way to provide help;
- the teacher explained things until the "light bulb went on" for the whole class;
- the teacher provided students with a variety of activities through which to learn;
- the teacher was able to control student behavior without ignoring the lesson;
- and the teacher understood students' situations and factored that into their lessons.

When we say "students wanted" these qualities present in their classrooms, we mean that the overwhelming majority of students reiterated these characteristics at every opportunity in the interviews over the three-year period. These are not "the survey says" kinds of answers in which a discussion of the percentage of students who

responded in particular ways is even viable because the number of dissenters would be in the single digits.

More important than the discrete elements in the list of desired qualities above is the sense that students were pointing to a more encompassing holistic principle to which they wanted teachers to adhere. Essentially we interpret students to be saying that the effective classroom ascribed to a "no **excuses**" policy. That is, there were no acceptable reasons why every student eventually could not complete his/her work, and there were no acceptable reasons why a teacher would "give up" on a child. The premise was that every child should complete every assignment and that it was the teacher's job to ensure that this happened. Accepting this premise meant that the teacher would have to use a host of strategies, including the six listed above. But the particular strategies used were less important than the underlying belief they symbolized: **that every child had to have the in-school support necessary for learning to occur.** The strategies then were the means by which the teacher made sure that every child received this support.

> It's not that I'm lazy, but I like a teacher that push me to learn. I might not be that confident at first, but then I'll get it.

As we discussed in previous reports, the cracks in these urban classroom floors were wide. Poverty, meager educational resources, crime, and all the attendant problems in the students' neighborhoods conspired to widen these cracks even further. There was no recourse for schools but to attempt to compensate for this societal lack of support from within. Some teachers in every one of the five schools created classrooms in which this support could be found. Students recognized and valued this, and then wondered why every classroom could not be that way.

This section lays out six qualities of classrooms that students wanted to be in, qualities that they believed would better enable them to learn and be successful in school. We caution against thinking of these as a simple checklist. While it was true that

teachers using more of these were more valued by students, the real purpose of these qualities was to create a support net underneath student performance.

The first part of this section revisits several of the teachers described earlier who best exemplified a "no excuses" approach. The second part examines each quality in turn to provide a more in-depth sense of what students meant by the terms.

The "No Excuses" Approach – Revisiting Earlier Teacher Examples

Teacher #1-A taught both English and Social Studies. Whenever we entered the class to get students for interviews, it appeared that students were working – at least there was not the boisterous outburst of comments and off-task behavior that accompanied our appearance in other classrooms. In students' comments presented earlier, Teacher #1-A relied on a variety of means by which he/she cajoled, nudged, and commanded the students to complete their assignments. These included the teacher's taking a keen interest even in the unmotivated students, always providing words of encouragement, giving students the opportunity to make up work, inviting students to come in for after-school tutoring, going over work until everyone understood it, making the work relevant to students' lives, and engaging students in the work with hands-on activities. Individually, any one of these efforts might have spurred one or two or several students to put forth more effort than they might otherwise have. Collectively, the strategies spurred nearly all, if not every one, to finish their work. The effect was not unnoticed. Students found themselves behaving better in the class than they did in others, appreciating the teacher's willingness to help them understand the work, and achieving the best grades they could.

> A teacher who stays on you is one who tell you to do your work, call your house over and over and over, say "you're missing this and that" and "you need to turn this in."

I: Do you behave better for some teachers than others?
S: With Teacher #1-A, everybody cool. In my other class, people are more talking.
I: Why is that?
S: Teacher #1-A have more respect for us.
I: What do you mean?
S: If you have questions you don't understand, you can come to Teacher #1-A and ask.
I: So you're saying you're comfortable with Teacher #1-A?
S: Yeah. (170611)

I: Does Teacher #1-A going over and over the work make the class go too slowly?
S: Most of the time we appreciate it. Most of us don't get it the first time. Teacher #1-A will explain how to do it 'til we understand. It don't seem like the class drag on; this teacher teach a good lesson.
I: How does the teacher handle mistakes?
S: We correct all our mistakes, even if it's a test, even if the grade is going in the book. Regardless, Teacher #1-A say you can learn. You can make up any test you unsatisfied with.
I: What's a good grade for students?
S: It's like it's split. You got some who try they hardest and work up to Bs and Cs. Others say as long as I'm passing it's okay. Teacher #1-A encourage you to reach the top.
I: You like that?
S: I do. (165611)

I: How do you get a good grade in this class?
S: Try your best, do your work.
I: Do you try?
S: If, basically, Teacher #1-A see you need help and you don't say nothing, Teacher #1-A say, "you not trying your best; you have to ask me." If you not doing nothing, Teacher #1-A let you know [he/she] is doing this to benefit you in the future, and will give you a extension.

I: How well are you doing in here?
S: Right now, Teacher #1-A say I am pulling all my Cs up to Bs. I been trying my best to do that. (157612)

Similarly, the replacement science teacher in School #4 was noted for his/her abilities to motivate students to do better, to encourage students to seek extra help, to help students when they did not understand a concept, to persuade students to work cooperatively to find solutions, to offer clear explanations for incorrect work, and to provide interesting activities in the classroom. Every student we talked to that had been in this class commented on the dramatic change in instruction and learning after the change in teachers occurred. Each was very clear about the benefits.

I: Are you ready for high school?
S: Yes, especially in science.
I: Why?
S: Teacher #4-A teaches us lots of different things and when teaching us if we get a bad grade Teacher #4-A tells us to do better. Teacher #4-A shows us what we did wrong. (421622)

S: We have fun. We are learning lots. (418622)

S: I'm learning all new stuff in science.
I: What makes you say that?
S: I've never done dissecting before. (414622)

Two of the students who nominated this replacement teacher's efforts as their favorite class explained:

It's my favorite because the teacher does more things with us, like experiments. When the test come, you know what you're doing, and you get a good grade. (466621)

Now we got a new teacher. It's my favorite class. The teacher explains things to us. With the old teacher, I did all the work but I didn't understand it. Now, we starting to

digest (sic) starfish. It is more interesting. (461622)

This opportunity to do experiments, to put their hands on animals and examine what the textbook was talking about firsthand, proved to be invaluable for students.

I: You're doing more experiments now?
S: Yeah.
I: You like this better?
S: Mmhmm.
I: Why is that?
S: Cause you really learn stuff. Copying from the board, you're just doing what somebody else already did. (464611)

Finally, the highly regarded math teacher in School #5 employed a set of signature actions that included encouraging people to keep trying until they got the right answers, pushing students to do more advanced work, checking students' work and going over it until they got it right, offering after-school tutoring help (even before the school started its program), explaining things step-by-step and breaking it down, showing students several different ways to solve a problem, and relating their work to their future.

I: Are you well prepared for high school?
S: Yes.
I: How do you know?
S: Teacher #5-A talks about it. He/she says we're doing ninth grade work.
I: How is that different?
S: We do more hard math, like geometry and equations. (529612)

I: What activities help you learn the most?
S: Math.
I: What is it about your math class?
S: It is the way Teacher #5-A teaches us. It is real clear. And if we don't understand, we can come in after school. (501612)

I: Are you learning the same things you learned last year?
S: We're learning new math.
I: What do you mean?
S: We doing, what's that called, doing integers, how to do common denominators.
I: You like that?
S: I like math; the teacher is teaching me more. So, if someone else needs help, I can teach them what I learned.
I: What grade are you getting in there?
S: B. (574612)

S: She show us tricks in there.
I: Tricks?
S: She will give us like a hard problem and then she will change it around, switch the numbers and make it a easier way – and a less faster way to do it.
I: What are you getting on your report card?
S: Last report period, I had a C or B. I brung it up from a D. (565611)

I think everyone should have a strict teacher like my teacher. We know there ain't no playing around. It's not a time to play...You can finish high school if you have a strict teacher. (554611)

While students highly valued the three teachers cited above, it was not difficult to find a set of similarly valued instructors in each building. In the next section we describe in more detail what made these teachers stand out in the minds of their students.

Qualities of the "No Excuses" Approach

There were at least six qualities, or strategies, that students repeatedly discussed in identifying (1) good teachers, (2) the classroom activities that helped them learn best, (3) reasons why they learned more and behaved better in some classrooms

than others, (4) changes that needed be made in their schools, and the like. Each of them is worth investigating in more depth to convey an idea of what elements of the "no excuses" approach looked and sounded like to students.

1. Teachers pushed students to complete their assignments.

> *I: Do you prefer a teacher who makes sure you do your work?*
> *S: Yes. I prefer a teacher who makes sure I do it right. If they know I can do it better, I want someone who will push me. (327612)*

This student's reaction was very typical of most of the students we interviewed. With rare exceptions they wanted a teacher who nudged them along and made sure that they worked. It was clear from this that few of them had the confidence, drive, perseverance, or determination to do it on their own. They wanted and expected to be motivated to learn. And that unwavering push usually had to come from their teachers.

For many students, that desire to be prodded derived from a fear that they could easily just slip into the habit of not doing work unless there was some encouragement.

> *It's not that I'm lazy, but I like a teacher that push me to learn. I might not be that confident at first, but then I'll get it. (270612)*

> *I: Do you prefer a teacher who is strict?*
> *S: Yes, but not too strict. I want a teacher who doesn't just pass me so when I get out in the world I won't know nothing. I prefer a teacher is doesn't let me give excuses for not doing my work. (528612)*

> *I: Do you prefer a teacher who doesn't let you have excuses for not doing your work?*
> *S: Yeah, I like the ones that don't allow excuses. It's my turn to get*

an education. I need to have someone to tell me when I'm tired and don't feel like doing the work that I should do it anyway. (332612)

I: Why do you prefer the teacher who keeps after you to do your work?
S: If they don't keep after you, you'll slide and never do the work. You just won't learn nothing if they don't stay on you.
I: How many of your teachers do that?
S: Most of them do. (425621)

How teachers went about making sure that students were not let off the hook varied. Sometimes the reminders took the form of regularly checking their work, providing a systematic accounting of what students were missing from required assignments, and calling home to ensure work was being completed:

S: She is always checking our books and our homework to make sure we're doing our work. (120611)

I: Do you prefer a teacher who makes sure you do your work?
S: Yeah.
I: Why?
S: It shows that they are not there just for the money; they are there to help you learn.
I: Do you have teachers like that this year?
S: Yeah, I have one who keeps after me.
I: What does she do?
S: If I miss an assignment she types up on a piece of paper what I am missing. (114611)

Not all reminders were formal or structured. Occasionally it just took the simple act of reiterating that they had ongoing assignments to do that night for homework:

I: How are your teachers this year about keeping after you to do your work?

S: They are good about staying after us. We are doing a career project now and we have homework every day. Our teacher reminds us that we need to do it all the time.
I: Do you like that?
S: Yeah.
I: Is that being too strict?
S: No. (412621)

Students also talked about teachers who would follow-up with phone calls home to make sure the work was completed.

I: Why are you getting an A in reading when you did so poorly last year?
S: I work hard. She's hard on us. I like that. It's helping me.
I: What does she do?
S: She called my house and talked to my mom. (500611)

A teacher who stays on you is one who tell you to do your work, call your house over and over and over, say "you're missing this and that" and "you need to turn this in." (161611)

I: What do your best teachers do to help you the most?
S: [Teacher's name], she knows my mom real good. She stays on my back. She says she'll call my mom. (300611)

Teachers' refusal to let students off the hook regarding their work also involved creating a belief in students that they could be successful learners. In essence it was an attitude. This happened, according to students, in a couple of ways. The first was by having teachers acting as cheerleaders and providing students with the general words of encouragement that they could do the work.

I: Do you prefer a teacher who makes sure you do your work?
S: Yes.
I: Why?

S: They get you motivated to do your work.
I: What does your teacher say to you?
S: You can make it. You have to work hard. You need to do more than just have a C.
I: Why is that important?
S: I used to be lazy. I hated school. But I realized that if I want to apply for a job, I need my education. (414622)

I like the fact that she stays on students. Maybe they parents are not on them. With the teacher encouraging me, it makes me achieve more. (160612)

I: What do your best teachers do that help you learn?
S: She makes bets and do's.
I: Can you give me an example?
S: She says: "I bet you can get an A." "If you do this, I'll let you do that." You know, that kind of stuff. (326611)

I: Do you prefer a teacher who keeps after you or one that lets you decide if you will do the work?
S: I prefer one who stays after me.
I: Why?
S: They get you motivated to do your work.
I: What do they do?
S: They say you can make it. You just have to work hard. They tell you you need more than just a D or a C. (414622)

Yet another way to instill that attitude was by setting high expectations for the quality of the work and not letting students give up until they got it right.

S: My English teacher, she makes you do better.
I: What does she do?
S: She gives you higher work. For example, our reading class level was low, but by giving us harder work we are better. (104612)

I: Do you prefer a teacher who makes sure you do your work?
S: Yeah. He push me. I like that. He motivates me. He wants me to do good.
I: How do you know that?
S: He keeps pressing me until I get it right. (329612)

I like a teacher who stay on you until you get it done. (462621)

Regardless of the specifics of how teachers went about pushing students to work, the key for students was that there was someone who cared enough to make sure the work was being done and, in that caring, communicated to students that they were valued learners.

S: A good teacher is someone who stays on top of you and gives you homework. Someone who prepares you for the next grade. A good teacher cares about you.
I: What do you mean by cares?
S: If you don't do it, she doesn't just say it's on you to get the work in. (126611)

I: What kind of teacher is most helpful to you?
S: One who stays on your back.
I: Why do you prefer that?
S: 'Cause with that kind of teacher you know you're doing good, passing, learning, and doing more. (300611)

One of my teachers, she make you stay on your work; my other teacher, she don't care. She should be harder on the kids. The kids get on her nerves. (152612)

2. Teachers were willing to help.

While there was a swagger and exaggerated confidence in the students' social behavior and peer relationships at school, there was no such legerdemain when it came to

students talking about their academic knowledge. They were quick to acknowledge that they did not know everything and generally did not hesitate to ask for help. Teachers who went to the trouble to put forth some extra effort and provide students with additional help received the strongest vote of support from students. Nowhere was that captured better than in the one accounting by a young lady of a fellow classmate who had done nothing all year. According to her, the teacher's willingness to continually assist the recalcitrant student turned him around.

> *I: Tell me more about Teacher #1-A?*
> *S: One boy in the class, he do all his work now. If it wasn't for Teacher #1-A he wouldn't do nothing. At the beginning of the year he don't do nothing; now he does. He wouldn't even take the SAT9s; all he did was just bubbled in the answers [randomly].*
> *I: Why do you think that student is working now?*
> *S: Cause Teacher #1-A took time out to help him and talk to him. (106612)*

The most meaningful way that teachers helped students was to provide one-on-one assistance. The more pessimistic of educators will always point to the difficulty of doing that, especially with large class sizes. We do not deny that those constraints are a significant barrier, but the more important message is that there were teachers who, even in those challenging situations, found a way to provide that one-on-one assistance.

> *I: What activities help you the most?*
> *S: In math, it's showing us several different ways to do the problem. Also, tutoring one-on-one really helps. That way you get to spend more time with the teacher. (505611)*

> *I: What is a good teacher?*
> *S: It is someone who is always trying to help you out.*
> *I: What is the best way to help students?*
> *S: When they discuss a lesson with you one-on-one. (101631)*

One common way that students mentioned for teachers to offer one-on-one assistance was to encourage students to seek before or after school help. In one school (School #5) this form of help was systematically organized into a formal program with most of the teachers participating.

S: I was getting Fs in September but I got my act together.
I: What did your teacher do?
S: She said she didn't want me to be left back.
I: What did she do to help you?
S: She suggested I get some tutoring and she did it. I come after school every Monday and Wednesday.
I: How does that help?
S: We get to do the work and learn how to study. (105612)

I: What do teachers do if you don't understand something in class.
S: If we don't understand, some will come over and say, "Here's my phone number; call if you don't understand." Others just say, "If you don't know it, it's on you."
I: Which do you prefer?
S: I like the ones that tell you, "I'm going to help you out."
I: Why?
S: Cause it make you feel someone care about you and that they not just working for the money.
I: Don't you feel like they are nagging you?
S: No. You know what you gotta do; they just reminding you. (564612)

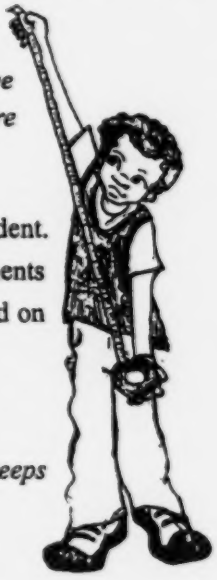
I: What is different about school this year?
S: We have an after school tutoring program.
I: Do you attend?
S: Yes, I go every day, or at least three times a week. . . .
I: What kind of work do you do?
S: The teacher helps you with your class work. The whole point of it is to keep you from failing. (508611)

But help did not have to be so elaborate and structured as regular or even periodic visits to see the teacher before or after school. It was as simple as the teacher's finding time during the regular lesson to take a few minutes to go to an individual student's desk, or make the student comfortable with approaching the teacher, or just stop the whole class to see if they needed extra help.

> *S: I prefer the more involved teachers.*
> *I: What do you mean by that?*
> *S: You know, the ones that pull me aside, talk to me, are willing to help me out. (325611)*

> *I: Are you having a good year?*
> *S: Yes. I switched floors this year.*
> *I: How did that make a difference?*
> *S: The teachers are different.*
> *I: How?*
> *S: They be helping you more. If I ask a question, they show me how to do it. (332612)*

> *A good teacher takes time out to see if all the kids have what they're talking about ... and cares about how they're doing and will see if they need help. (369612)*



But reaching out did not just mean spending time with a student. Students also conceived of it as creating organizational arrangements that gave them second chances when work did not get produced on time.

> *I: What's a good teacher?*
> *S: [Teacher's name], she's one who cares. She keeps you for detention.*
> *I: What does she do?*
> *S: She keep you after school and she calls your home.*
> *I: Can you give me another example of how she helps you?*

S: Yeah, over Christmas break she gave us all a piece of paper with everything we did [all the assignments] from September through December. We got a chance to make up all the work [we hadn't turned in]. Then she got tougher. (111611)

Students recognized that offering extra help meant teachers walked a fine line that bordered on being too pushy. But, on balance, they recognized that the extra help paid off in the end.

I: What happens when you don't do your work?
S: My teacher try to help you understand it more. Most of the time when they don't do it, it's cause they don't understand it.
I: Is this how all teachers should act?
S: Yeah. They should do it for all people. Some kids can do it, but don't want to. If the teacher pushes them, they can do it.
I: Doesn't that sometimes make students mad?
S: Umhmm. They say, "Well, you ain't my mom"; the teacher say, "Then why do you come to school?"
I: Does that work for most of them in your class?
S: Yeah. (574612)

Another student pointed out the consequences of not receiving timely help and, at the same time, highlighted the dilemma teachers faced in having to accommodate student absences.

S: Say for instance I didn't come to school. The next day I came in, they went over something new. There wouldn't be like time to show me what they did. And the teacher wouldn't make sure I understood. So, I start moving on with them, but I be behind. They should have given extra help.
I: When could they do that?
S: During lunch time. During class time they could let me know the basic things. Then, when lunch time came, they could pull me to the side and ask me if I want to do it. Then it would be my choice. (385611)

3. Teachers go to great lengths to explain and stay with a topic until everyone understood it.

A common complaint among students was that teachers often moved through the material too fast, not taking the time to make sure that everyone understood the key elements. Students really valued teachers who bucked that trend and would take the time to explain it so that everyone understood. Students talked about five ways in which good teachers explained things well. The first was outlining in clear terms a set of steps for getting to an answer:

> *I: What kinds of activities help you the most?*
> *S: When the teacher breaks it down, gives you every detail . . . (326611)*

> *I: What is your definition of a good teacher?*
> *S: Someone who knows how to break down explanations. Teachers who understand when kids have questions. (522611)*

> *I: Are you getting a good education this year?*
> *S: Yes.*
> *I: Why?*
> *S: I'm learning a lot.*
> *I: What are teachers doing?*
> *S: They feed it into our head real good. They do it step-by-step and they break it down. (526611)*

The second way to explain things well was to take as long as was needed, not rushing to get to the end of the chapter by a certain time.

> *I: Is school the same or different when compared to last year?*
> *S: Things are different.*
> *I: How have things changed?*
> *S: The teachers are real at ease. They take their time, you know, go step-by-step. We learn it more. It seems like they got the time to explain it all. We don't have to leave anyone behind. (533612)*

I: Why did your math grade go from a D last year to an A this year?
S: I didn't understand the teacher last year. [This year's teacher] explains it much better.
I: What do you mean?
S: She stays on a subject for two days or until we know it for the test. (102612)

I: What's a good teacher?
S: One who takes the time to explain things. [Teacher's name] does a better job than the other teachers. She is willing to take the whole class period to explain it, if we need to. (120611)

Third, students also bemoaned the fact that too often teachers' explanations simply mirrored the language of the textbook, which in many cases was quite foreign to them. What they found particularly helpful were teachers who took the time to also explain a concept in their own words as an alternative to the written explanation.

I: What activities help you learn the most?
S: I like to listen to the teacher.
I: Why is that so helpful?
S: Cause she puts it in her own words (rather than the text book) so that I understand what it means. (401621)

I: Do some teachers explain things better?
S: Yes! [Teacher's name]. When we start a new chapter, he always puts it in his own words. (411622)

Fourth, students also praised a teacher's explanation when it incorporated multiple ways to solve the problem. Students were savvy to the facts of the real world where there was almost always more than one way to approach a problem and more than one solution to any given approach. So, in the eyes of these students, a teacher who explained well was also one who could provide a range of strategies for solving a problem.

I: What activities help you learn the most?
S: Math class.
I: What is it about math class that is so helpful?
S: The teacher shows us several different ways to do the problems. (505611)

Or, provide different ways to approach the problem:

I: Is your teacher good at explaining things?
S: Yes. She talks about it both before and after we read a section from the book. (114611)

Finally, students also acknowledged the value of providing an assessment or feedback loop to make sure students understood the materials:

I: What kinds of activities help you the most?
S: . . . When the teacher teaches you something and then asks questions (to make sure we understand). (326611)

I: Do you prefer a teacher who makes sure you do your work?
S: Yeah.
I: Why?
S: They take their time and they talk to you about it (the work). They make sure you understand and know what you are doing.
I: How do they go about doing that?
S: They check everybody and explain it again if it is not right. They mark it and whatever is wrong they have us redo it for a higher grade.
I: Do you learn better by redoing your work?
S: Yes. You understand it better. (136612)

S: [Teacher's name] she tells us what we are missing [in our assignments]. She say she don't want a class of failures. She go over tests ahead of time and tells us what she expects of us. (121612)

4. Teachers varied classroom activities.

As we learned previously with these students, different activities appealed to different students. For example, some liked working in groups; others preferred working alone. It was clear from our conversations with students that no one instructional strategy would work best. The following quotes are representative of the range of responses we heard.

> *I prefer projects, doing group projects because they are more fun; and working in a group, you have more people to help you. (151612)*

> *I prefer the teacher to talk to us and then explain it. (261611)*

> *My favorite teacher is one who makes her lessons relate to people my age. Like we might do plays where we acted out a story. When kids do stuff together, they learn that way. (377612)*

> *I prefer working in groups. You have more fun and you learn at the same time. You learn quickly. So, you have fun and you do work. But most of the time we be bored not in groups. (162612)*

> *I: What kinds of activities help you learn best.*
> *S: When we listened to Shakespeare on tape, then we created a talk show program where we talked about it and took up sides like the Jerry Springer show. We even had a brawl! Also, our teacher dresses up as "granny grammar" and takes on a different personality. She talks about different grammar rules, like compound sentences. She makes it funny and we remember it better. (123612)*

I prefer to work by myself cause most people don't read on the same level. I don't like to listen to others read. I might be ahead or behind where they are, whatever the case may be. (167612)

> *S: My favorite subject is math 'cause she made our work into games and I caught on real fast doing it that way.*
> *I: Can you give an example?*
> *S: Okay, with graphing. She made all these games out of graphs. She had worksheets for it. Had all the directions for it on the paper. But I don't like doing it in groups.*
> *I: Why?*
> *S: Cause I get irritable and you sit there and argue for half an hour when you could just go to the teacher and get help. (264612)*

I prefer discussions mostly. You get more out of it. The more talk we have together, the more we go over things, the more we learn. If you have an experiment and don't have a discussion about it, you wouldn't know what you're doing. (263612)

Projects, lectures, real world connections, groups, creative acting, individual work, games, and discussions were all preferred ways of learning. No one strategy was likely to be a surefire success in a class with all the students. Thus, varying activities reached more students, and kept students interested.

> *S: I don't have no favorite class. I don't like none of them.*
> *I: Why?*
> *S: They boring.*
> *I: What makes them boring?*
> *S: Cause we don't do something that's fun.*
> *I: What makes something fun?*
> *S: When you do different activities. (150612)*

5. Teachers maintained order in the classroom so that instruction could occur.

The first four qualities of the "classrooms that students wanted" are aspects of instruction – creating a focus on student work completion, helping students with their work, enabling them to understand what they were to do and learn, and providing a variety of activities to introduce and reinforce content. The remaining two were more related to establishing an environment within which such instruction could take place. The first concerned how well teachers were able to handle discipline so that they could focus on instruction, and the second involved teachers' ability to relate to their students.

My favorite teacher is one who makes her lessons relate to people my age. Like we might do plays where we acted out a story. When kids do stuff together, they learn that way.

There was an "edge" to the atmosphere in all five schools. As students walked the halls and sat in classrooms, the potential for trouble bubbled just under the surface of interactions. As the old saying goes, "the trouble with trouble is that it starts out like fun." Thus, a good-natured "bust" would morph into a challenging taunt, a playful put-down would turn disrespectful, or a well-intentioned reprimand would evoke an agitated, aggressive response. The hallways and classrooms teetered on the verge of emotional outbreaks and physical retaliation. This was the reality of education in the city.

According to students, teachers varied tremendously on how well they were able to manage the ebb and flow of the tide of disruption. Some teachers seemed to spend all of their time trying to "control" students. They yelled. They grew ominously quiet. They refused to continue lessons until the class settled down. They wrote numerous "pink slips," referring students to various administrators, counselors, and detention rooms. They sent misbehaving students out of the room. They concentrated only on the well-behaved students and left the others to their own designs in the corners of the classroom. They settled for an occasional order as the primary goal of

the class. The consequence, according to students, was a lack of learning in that subject.

> *S: We act better in math and science 'cause the social studies teacher likes to have fun, to act like one of us. She'll joke around with us.*
> *I: What do you prefer?*
> *S: I would rather the teacher not joke around so much; kids take it to the point where they might not understand when to stop. (166611)*

> *I: What do your teachers who can't control the class do?*
> *S: Nothing. All they do is talk but nobody listen 'cause they know the teachers won't do anything.*
> *I: Do you prefer a strict teacher?*
> *S: I want one strict enough for me to learn. (270612)*

> *The kids don't do the work. The teacher is hollering and screaming, "Do your work and sit down!" This makes the ones that want to learn go slower. It makes your grade sink down. It just messes it up for you. The teacher is trying to handle everybody and can't. (263612)*

> *Some teachers don't care if you act up. Some teachers can't teach. Like if you talking, they won't teach. They let you talk. And then some punish the whole class for one person talking. That's not right. (556612)*

A student on the honor roll at the school had this to say about the disruptive classes:

> *It frustrates me to be in a bad class. The teachers need to punish the students better than they do. Like make a threat, but then they don't really go through with it. Sometimes they suspend students, but most of them like it 'cause then they don't have to come to school. (268611)*

Such situations were the subject of a major portion of last year's report and most often were the ones that served as negative examples in the "classroom environment" differences discussed earlier in this report. For a variety of reasons, including a revolving door of substitute teachers and new teachers unaccustomed to the challenges of an urban setting, students identified a disturbingly frequent number of classrooms in which they said learning did not occur in at least one or two of their major subjects – math, English, reading, science, and social studies.

Despite their apparent enthusiasm for disruption, an overwhelming majority of students greatly disliked being in such classrooms. In a logic peculiar to the young, perhaps, they saw themselves as controllable and willing to be controlled if only the teacher knew how. Every single student had at least one such teacher and highly valued the opportunity to be in those classrooms. The teachers sometimes used different means and different styles, but behavioral success translated into successful learning on the part of students.

> *I: What should the teacher you described with no control do to change?*
> *S: Be like my other teacher.*
> *I: What is she like?*
> *S: She got that mean look.*
> *I: Tell me more.*
> *S: She have that attitude, like if you do something you gonna pay for it.*
> *I: But the other teacher said that too. How is this teacher different?*
> *S: She don't forget nothing. She follow through on it.*
> *I: Which do you prefer?*
> *S: In a way, I do prefer strict. Teachers that just let you do what you want, they don't get a point across. Strict teachers gets the point across. (451612)*

> *I: Students are well-behaved in your math class?*
> *S: Yes.*

I: Why is that?
S: We know, we realize we learned our math lessons. It's the class you just came in to get me out of. That's how we are in there. If we can't get it together, we can't graduate. (554611)

I: Which do you prefer, strict or not?
S: I prefer strict cause it's easier to do your work?
I: How can a teacher be strict?
S: Like my math teacher.
I: What does she do?
S: She just know how to react to kids when they act up. Like say "be quiet" rather than "shut up." She call they parents too.
I: What's your favorite class?
S: Hers...cause I learn more things in there. (468621)

The culpability of students in contributing to out-of-control classrooms was undeniable. They were responsible. But they were not going to be the solution. They irrevocably assigned that responsibility to the teacher. Thus, whether or not students learned would remain a direct function of a teacher's ability to maintain order in the classroom.

6. Teachers respected students, related to them, and tried to understand their worlds.

I heard teachers talking about people, saying those kids can't do nothing. Kids want teachers who believe in them. (264612)

Students applauded teachers who did more than just pass along content to them. They especially appreciated teachers who made the effort to understand and believe in them. That was commonly accomplished in one of two ways. The first was for teachers to take the content students were learning and make it relevant to students' lives.

S: I like it in reading when we talk about real life stuff.
I: Why is that helpful?
S: Cause it makes me more aware of stuff going on. (325611)

S: Instead of just writing lots of stuff (notes off the board), we have conversations and discussions.
I: What kinds of things do you talk about?
S: He talks about government – how it is around the neighborhoods. (329612)

I: What are you studying in social studies?
S: We are learning about Mesopotamia.
I: Is that interesting?
S: Yes.
I: Why?
S: Cause the teacher makes it interesting.
I: How does she make it interesting?
S: She tells us stories about her life there. That makes me want to learn about the past. (500611)

Establishing a connection with students' lives went beyond using relevant content. It also was reflected in taking an interest in the students as humans and showing some concern for their daily lives – establishing an emotional attachment. As a couple of students so succinctly put it: *"I like someone who puts themselves into our shoes." (12961)* and *"I guess a teacher don't got to be nice, but they got to be respectful." (161611)* This was certainly difficult to do in these schools, but in the eyes of students it was what ultimately made them want to learn.

S: [The teacher] gets us prepared for the future and tells us not to go down the wrong road.
I: What does he do?
S: He relates to us. Instead of talking proper English, he talks about why people be busting on each other. He says it is a way to say I love you. (315612)

Often that caring focused on dealing with problems that went beyond academic ones.

> *Sometimes a teacher don't understand what people go through. They need to have compassion. A teacher who can relate to students will know when something's going on with them. If like the student don't do work or don't understand, the teacher will spend a lot of time with them. Some teachers do the lesson one time and expect you to catch on. (165611)*
>
> > *S: [Teacher's name] is very nice and helpful.*
> > *I: What does she do?*
> > *S: She holds you back for a few minutes after class and asks you what the problem is. (105612)*
>
> *A good teacher to me is a teacher who is patient, willing to accept the fact that she might be dealing with students who have problems. (160612)*
>
> *Both of my teachers are good teachers. That means they know what they want to do. They want to get it done. They understand you better. They talk to you nicely and so that is how you treat them. They also don't treat one student better than the other. (157612)*
>
> > *S: My math teacher is a pretty good teacher.*
> > *I: Why?*
> > *S: Since this is one of his first year's teaching, I give him credit. He relates, but he also teaches. With some students, he tries to get them to work and he tries to communicate with them.*
> > *I: What do you mean by communicate?*
> > *S: He jokes around and he laughs and he'll get in our conversations. It's sort of rude but it is good in a way too. He advises us. He not only tries to teach but gets involved with us. (453622)*

The Benefits to Students of a "No Excuses" Approach

Students seemed to equate the actions associated with a "no excuses" approach with "caring." This suggests that the above qualities took on an importance far beyond the specific instances in which they occurred. Indeed, their cumulative presence apparently led students to construct an image of certain teachers as truly interested and invested in enabling students to succeed. Examples in which students paired these actions with more global attributions of teachers' concern for their learning can be found in many of the earlier sections. Here we want to call attention to this phenomenon formally as a means of underscoring the significance the students attached to teachers' actions that prevented them from avoiding a task or from learning some concept.

We illustrate the point with students from a single school to convey the extent to which students at all performance levels valued teachers who took the time to prevent failure. Remember that our samples within each school cut across academic and behavioral performance. Thus, being able to draw on a wide range of the students from a school increases the likelihood that the students shared the expressed attitudes regardless of their standing in the school.

Three students from School #3 illustrated the manner in which they invoked "caring" as the primary motivation behind a teacher's actions.

> *I: Are you getting a good education?*
> *S: Yes, because my teachers this year say, "Pay attention; next year is going to be harder." They be like, "Come on, you can do good."*
> *I: Do you like for teachers to be like this?*
> *S: Yes, it tells me they care.*
> *I: What do you mean by "care"?*
> *S: Say if a teacher just sits down and says, "I don't gotta teach you." They just trying to get money. If they pat you on the back, that's a good teacher. It shows they want you to do good. (358612)*

I: Do you like for a teacher to push you to do your work?
S: If you don't do your work, you ain't gonna get nowhere.
I: So you like for them to nag you?
S: Uh-huh.
I: How does that make you feel?
S: Better.
I: Explain.
S: I know [he or she] cares about me getting a good education.
I: Do they all care?
S: Some do. (361611)

One of my teachers really push kids to do work. She is the most caring teacher. She really want you to do work. Sometimes that make me mad but I still try to do the work. It nice to know you got a teacher who cares. (353612)

It appeared that believing a teacher cared about them did more than just make students feel good. Students in the school transformed teachers' caring enough to "teach" them into academic self-confidence. Six more of the students in the building offered comments on this development.

One male explained: *"[When they push me] it makes me think I can do the work; I'm glad they're trying to teach me instead of ignoring me, thinking I can't do it." (368611)* Another male agreed that such actions, *"gives me confidence to do my work." (355611)* In response to the interview's query about what it took to be a successful student, a third one stressed that *"all students need people who are there for them." (363611)* A female looked at this topic from the other side of the coin. She argued that with the students in her school, "*The teachers have to push them or they will give up." (369612)* A fifth student in the school went to some length to describe the effect that a particular "pushy" teacher had on him:

It made me feel more comfortable, knowing that I'd be able to know the work. See, at first, I didn't like her subject. At first, I didn't do no work. I thought it like any other class

where the teacher would not make sure you know what you're doing. But my teacher was like "you want a F, you want a F?" She kept getting on me. I like that. (385611)

As the above student claimed, a "no excuses" teacher often meant the difference between success and failure. When left to their own devices, some students worked hard to not do work. They knew when they could cut class and still blend in with hall traffic to escape notice; and they would strategically calibrate their classroom effort to navigate the boundary between an F and a D. These actions were possible as long as there were cracks in the system through which students could slip.

The "no excuses" teacher closed the cracks. For example, one student discovered this late in his eighth grade year when a teacher to whom the student had not been assigned essentially asked to have the young man moved to his class for all of his major subjects. The teacher had had the student two years earlier and was disturbed by the student's obvious efforts to avoid going to classes in eighth grade. The teacher explained to us that the student could do the work but was successfully managing to avoid doing so. Rather than complain about the teacher's close supervision, the student praised him.

I: What is the best thing about this school?
S: My teacher.
I: Why?
S: He teach and he don't play. Other teachers they play and let you play. My teacher tell you what you got to do. That is why I come to school now – to learn.
I: So, you're saying the teacher stays on students?
S: Yes. He stay on your back.
I: Do you prefer that?
S: Mmhmm.
I: Do you feel ready now for high school?
S: Mmhmm.
I: How do you know?
S: Cause I know how to do stuff now. (365611)

Students in each of the other schools expressed this same line of reasoning – that "no excuses" equaled caring which led to increased self-confidence in doing school work – equally adamantly and in similar proportions.

It is important to point out that students were able to separate qualities in a teacher that they just liked from those that helped them learn better. In other words, students, like the following three females from School #5, could distinguish between a teacher's personal style or demeanor and a teacher's pedagogy.

> *S: My teacher is serious.*
> *I: What does that mean?*
> *S: It mean like he don't play around; he always have a straight face.*
> *I: Do you like that?*
> *S: I don't like it, but it is good that he that way. He teaches us about life that way. (582612)*

> *In that classroom – we all say she was the meanest teacher; but I bet you, you will learn something in there. She will force you to learn...Even if I say to her "stop bothering me," I like it. I still want them to be nagging me. (578612)*

> *She's mean out of the kindness of her heart. It's for a reason: So we can learn. (556612)*

But, as was discussed in the previous two years, students had to perceive that teachers were fair in their treatment of students. There was "mean" and then there was "mean," as one more female in the same school explained:

> *My teacher is strict. He always yelling at us and makes us do stuff we don't want to do. I prefer a teacher to be strict, but not like that. He is always yelling at people when they not even saying something. (562612)*

To us, examples such as the above ones clearly exemplified the depth of students' understanding of their classroom experiences. They were not so superficial as to only praise the "cool" teachers and to ridicule the more stern members of a faculty. Instead, their reference point for judgments about teacher quality was whether they learned – a lesson that perhaps occasionally gets lost in adult educational politics.

Summary

The above examples are by no means exhaustive, but they capture the key themes related by students. The specifics of each action were less important than the overall message: taken together students were saying that good teachers would not give up on them for any reason. That is, they felt that the teachers believed they could complete the work and then did everything possible to make that happen. The above quotes suggest that students began to believe in themselves, as well. It is also more than coincidental that students so often associated this approach with "caring" or, more tellingly, with simply "teaching." Teachers who continually pushed students to do their work became known as those that "cared," or who "actually taught," or "did their job."

But it is not enough to highlight the qualities of a few exemplars working against great odds in difficult situations. Indeed, too many stories of success in American education are descriptions of "pockets" where a teacher or even a team of teachers succeeds despite the larger environment around them. For the District's reform to truly have an impact and allow the students we interviewed to fulfill their dreams for the future, we must see pockets transformed to whole schools. In the next section we highlight one school that seemed to be moving in the direction that students suggest their schools should.

Section 6: Spreading the Pockets of Reform Success

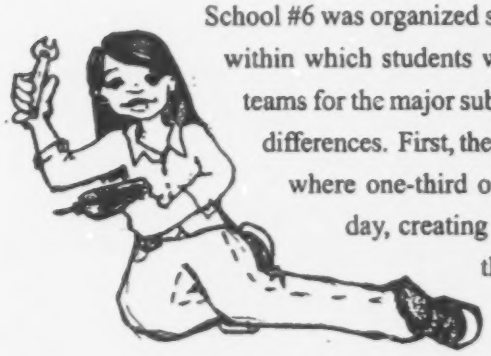
The overall reform goal in Philadelphia is to ensure that all students learn challenging content. To do that, students have to be in classrooms where learning is possible on more than a hit or miss basis. Thus, whatever else reform accomplishes it has to at least "scale up" the pockets of success within each school to encompass the whole school.

Another way of phrasing this goal is to think of it as reducing the significant variations in instructional quality that currently exist across classrooms. The classrooms where students experience little pedagogical accommodation to learning styles and discipline-defined best practice, where students encounter watered-down and below grade-level curriculum, and where students claim the atmosphere is not amenable to learning have to move in the direction of the types of exemplars described above. Moreover, classroom interactions and activities have to become infused with the "no excuses" belief, so that this improved instructional setting can actually benefit all classroom residents, not just those students who already motivate themselves or have adequate support outside school. Indeed, if a student's success on a task depends on resources, support, and assistance that are not provided within the school's walls, then the task is sure to result in failure for some.

Success for all students, then, requires school-wide attention to the quality of their instructional experiences. Evidence we gathered in a sixth school that was added to the study this year suggests that such school-wide attention is possible in a setting similar to that of each of the other five schools, **if** extra resources are brought to the effort. The following section provides student-based evidence that a long-term partnership between a research and development center and a school can improve consistency and quality of students' pedagogical, content, and classroom environment experiences.

A Description of the School

The community of students at School #6 was more diverse than the other five. Forty-six percent of the students were Latino, 26 percent African American, 15 percent Asian, and 14 percent Caucasian with a significant number of these being Arab-Americans. Its attendance area touched on the edges of the areas for two of the other five schools, so any differences in neighborhood housing and economics were modest at best, although the figure for the percentage of students from low income families was in between the low 80s figure for School #1 and low 90s for the other schools.



School #6 was organized similarly to the other five. It had SLCs, within which students were assigned to two- or three-teacher teams for the major subjects. However, there were a couple of differences. First, the school spilled over to an annex building where one-third of the students remained for the entire day, creating a "school within a school feeling" for those students. Second, nearly half of the teaching teams used a looping approach where the students and teachers were able to spend at least two years together. Separate research in the school on this practice points to benefits: more caring on the part of teachers, higher use of research-based instructional practices, and increased student effort (MacIver, et. al., 1999).

Most notable was the school's partnership with an educational research and development center housed in a major university. Through this federally-funded program, in its third year at the time of the study, teachers became involved with long-range instructional planning, extensive professional development, and standards-based curricula in all four of the major subject areas. The program also included a once-a-week career exploration program to expose students to future career options and to examine career attitudes and interests.

Students' Aspirations and Preferences for Classroom Experiences

Although the students were more diverse ethnically that those in the other five schools, there was little to distinguish them from their counterparts in terms of their future plans and their preferences for classrooms that supported learning. Like their peers, School #6's students planned to finish high school, attend college, and find work in their preferred occupations in numbers that far exceeded what the hard statistics about urban youth would predict.

The students were certainly no less optimistic about their educational futures. All but two (96 percent - 55 of 57 who were asked) had plans for post-secondary education. The students were equally confident that they eventually would be able to obtain satisfying, high status occupations. Their selections of professional (doctors, lawyers, and sports) and trade-related work (hairdressing, owning a local business) mirrored those of their peers in the other schools, with the exception of a somewhat greater interest in computer-related careers.

Also like the students in the other five schools, those in School #6 mentioned the qualities outlined in Section 5 of this report extensively: (1) teachers who "stayed on students" to complete assignments; (2) teachers who provided help; (3) teachers who explained things clearly; (4) teachers who varied activities; (5) teachers who controlled student behavior, and (6) teachers who understood students. There was not much of a difference in terms of the frequency with which they talked about the characteristics either. What was different, however, was the degree to which they described these as being regularly present in their classrooms as opposed to something they wanted to have happen or experienced in just one classroom. The students tended to ground their descriptions almost exclusively in situations they were currently experiencing. Thus, in describing the routines of their classroom, the students portrayed much greater consistency in pedagogy, content, and classroom environment than was the case in the other schools.

We next look at students' comments in each of those areas in turn.

Pedagogical Differences – The Case of Science

The approach to science at School #6 began with a set of broad questions: What is science? What do scientists do? The instructional program focused on questions like these as a way to break down students' idea that science was not for them. In the words of the science coordinator, "science is a hands-on, minds-on affair." In order to accomplish that students had weekly lab activities chosen to illustrate the role of science in students' everyday lives and the world beyond. To ensure ample time to explore important scientific principles the schedule permitted students one double period of laboratory science a week. In addition, all students participated in the District's annual Science Fair exhibition.

We do labs every Thursday. The teacher makes us show step-by-step how we did it. We have to write up our labs and she hands them back on Monday.

The curriculum included science kits, i.e., thematic units with hands-on materials necessary to promote inquiry-based learning on that topic. The kits were also aligned with both the national science standards and the new Philadelphia standards. Technology was also integrated with the science program through research assignments, word processing, graphing and special internet projects.

The difference between students' pedogogical experiences in science at School #6 and the other five schools was the hands-on nature of what they did. Indeed, experiments (or in one case what students described as projects) were a regular part of their science regimen. In contrast to the students at the other schools who noted a wide range in the frequency of labs, demonstrations, and projects, School #6's students uniformly participated in a double period of science once a week to do experiments.

We do lots of labs and projects. (603612)

We do labs every Thursday. The teacher makes us show step-by-step how we did it. We have to write up our labs and she hands them back on Monday. (604611)

I: Do you do much lab work?
S: Yeah, we work on them two or three times a week.
I: Does that help you learn better?
S: Yeah.
I: Why?
S: It's better than just writing stuff down. You get to learn by doing.
I: Can you give me an example?
S: Yeah. We were learning about contaminated water and we had to test 36 different water samples. (605611)

S: We have a double period every Tuesday where we do a lab. We also have homework with the lab.
I: What do you do for homework?
S: We usually have to write a one-page summary where we answer four questions: What did we do in the lab? What did we like about it? What do we need to do to improve? Would we do it again? (611651)

I: What do you do in science?
S: Every Thursday we do a double period lab.
I: Is that helpful?
S: Yeah, it helps me see what the book is talking about. It is better than reading about it. When you do it, you understand. (616612)

Instead of staying in books, we get to do hands-on things, like experiments. That's more interesting. The book is boring. (618641)

The students generally described textbook activities as more secondary to hands-on activities. Some still described a common routine of reading and taking notes, but others referred to the text as more of a reference guide.

I: Do you use the text book much?
S: Yes, we read and do the questions in the book. But we also do experiments two or three times a month, and we do lots of "how to" projects where we have to explain to the class step-by-step what we are doing, like how to bake a cake using a mix or by scratch. (608642)

We keep a notebook where we keep our notes from the textbook and our worksheets. But most of that is work related to our labs. Almost all our work is related to the lab. (620612)

I: Do you use the textbook much?
S: A little. Mostly when we are bad. (606621)

I: Do you use the textbook much?
S: No, we usually use the computers. (609651)

We only use the textbook for research. (610652)

We are always doing research. Every week we have a project where we go to the computer to find information. (612622)

I: Do you use the textbook much?
S: No. We are way past that. (627621)

Given students' oft-stated preference to be active in class, it was not surprising to find a high degree of enthusiasm for science in the school.

S: It's exciting and fun.
I: What are you doing?
S: We do experiments every Wednesday. We also are working on projects.
I: Can you give me an example?
S: We are studying the solar system and we are writing a book for

six to eight year olds.
I: Why is it fun?
S: Every day is a new thing! (606621)

I: Does doing experiments help you learn?
S: Yes, cause it gets people into it. It is more fun. It shows that there is an easy way and a hard way [to solve problems]. It shows us we can do it ourselves. (607612)

We retell the story. Usually we write a summary of two or three paragraphs. We also have to answer "treasure hunt" questions. And when we write something we correct it, revise it, and change with a friend to correct it again.

I: What do you do in science class?
S: We have lots of fun. All we do is projects where we try and understand how variables affect each other. Everyone understands what we are doing cause we do lots of hands-on stuff. We also sing and dance in there. The teacher comes up with songs for things that helps everyone remember stuff.
I: Can you give me an example?
S: Yeah, we did a "water cycle boogy." (610652)

I: What do you do in science?
S: We do lots of different stuff.
I: Can you give me an example?
S: We work in groups on projects. We get to pick the topic and the group. My group is working on the planets and we are doing a game board. (614611)

S: We just finished a "how to do" project.
I: What did you do?
S: I explained how to use hair rollers?
I: How does that help you understand science?

S: A part of science is being very clear about all the steps you follow in your experiments. We practice that by clearly going through the steps of a regular activity. (625612)

Compared to students in the other five schools, then, the students in School #6 nearly all reported that they had a hands-on, investigative science class where projects, experiments, and demonstrations were regular and frequent.

Content Differences – The Case of English

The reading/language arts program was the designed so that students received two periods of reading/language arts instruction (100 minutes) every day. Teachers were trained in a whole language approach that was literature-based rather than basal-oriented. Teachers prepared the students for treating reading and writing as an integrated activity by introducing authors and the literature genre, discussing relevant background information, and identifying new vocabulary words. The heart of the program were cooperative learning activities associated with each section of a particular book. An emphasis on writing was woven into the program at all points, as evidenced in the following activities that were part of the program's routine:

- **partner reading**: students read a section of the book first silently, then orally with a partner.

- **treasure hunts**: students searched for and wrote answers to questions about a book's plot, literary devices, and the writer's style and technique.

- **word mastery**: students practiced saying the new vocabulary words aloud with their partners until they could say them accurately and smoothly. They also wrote "meaningful" sentences for each new vocabulary word — i.e., elaborated sentences that provided context clues to the new word's meaning.

- **story retelling**: after reading a passage and discussing it with their partners and with the class, students were expected to summarize the main points to their partners.

- **story-related writing**: after reading a section of a book students were given special prompts that required them to write a brief composition about what they had just read.

- **extension activities**: A variety of cross-curriculum assignments used writing, research, fine arts skills, and interdisciplinary projects to explore themes and ideas from a story.

- **tests**: students were expected to respond to a mixture of analytical and detail-oriented questions about the story's main issues, write meaningful sentences for selected vocabulary words, and read aloud passages to the teacher or another adult.

- **explicit instruction in comprehension strategies**: students received instruction in identifying main ideas and themes, drawing conclusions, making predictions, understanding figurative language, etc.

The consequence of the school's having an established, focused curriculum in language arts was a remarkable unanimity among these students' definitions of what it means to "do writing." Almost all the students described writing as a frequent, creative, constructive act. The students, thus, shared a common understanding and acceptance of the fact that writing required a process (almost all could elaborate what that process was) and that an important element of that process was developing multiple drafts.

I: Do you follow any procedure when you are writing?
S: We begin by constructing a web — only for major projects.
I: What happens next.
S: Then we go through several drafts.
I: How many drafts?

S: We usually do a first draft, a second draft, and then a final copy. (603612)

I: What do you do in RELA?
S: We are writing about four days a week. We usually write to some writing prompt. The teacher give us some examples with a Venn diagram. We follow the five steps of the writing procedure. And most every day we are working with other students on writing. (626612)

I: What activities help you learn the best?
S: When we do pre-writing.
I: What is that?
S: Its when you organize what you want to say. (605611)

I: Are you getting better at writing?
S: Yes.
I: How do you know?
S: We have to keep rewriting things and if we get it wrong he makes us do it again. (607612)

We always write and then we go over each other's work. (610652)

I: What do you have to do to get an A on a writing assignment?
S: You have to do lots of rewriting, like changing words and sentence around. It is important to be clear. If you write too much you might not make sense. (612622)

We often get in groups and we write stories collectively. We trade papers all the time. (614611)

I: Is writing helpful to you?
S: Yes.
I: Why?
S: [The teacher] helps us edit and rewrite things.

I: How many times do you rewrite things?
S: Mostly we rewrite two or three times. (618641)

I: Do you redo drafts when you write in RELA?
S: Yes. You have to keep writing until you get it right – maybe three times. (621621)

S: I learn more in RELA.
I: Why?
S: I like writing.
I: What makes writing so interesting?
S: When we write we are learning to make it sound better each time we rewrite it. (623642)

S: Every time we read something we write about it.
I: What do you write?
S: We retell the story. Usually we write a summary of two or three paragraphs. We also have to answer "treasure hunt" questions. And when we write something we correct it, revise it, and change with a friend to correct it again.
I: How many times do you rewrite most things?
S: Mostly about three times. (624631)

An element showed up in the students' comments about writing that was largely missing in the other schools – that writing's purpose was to communicate with others. For example, the students would expressly mention that including details was important to a successful piece of writing because those details would *"let a person get the point" (652612)* and *"make a person understand what something looks like" (656621)*. Obviously writing was part of communicating, but for many of the students in the other schools, writing was viewed in more rudimentary terms. Certainly writing comprised a significant portion of the school day at School #6. Students said that they were expected to write daily and that writing was integrated with their other language arts experiences. But even more importantly, writing was also stressed in the other subjects, particularly math and science.

We write every day, usually to some set of prompts. We just finished some historical stories. Yesterday we did a retelling of Norma [an opera they had seen downtown]. (602612)

We write hard every day. (605621)

> *S: For science homework we usually have to write a couple of paragraphs about our experiment.*
> *I: What do you write about?*
> *S: Did we enjoy the experiment? What did we do? What did we find? (613651)*

In science we are writing a book on the solar system for 6 to 8 year olds. (615612)

In math class our teacher grades our journals and he makes us write reports. That is the first year the math has not been all numbers. (611511)

Thus, the students in School #6 shared a more singular definition of what it took to write well, and this definition emphasized the overall process of writing, with correct grammar, sentence structure, and organization as components.

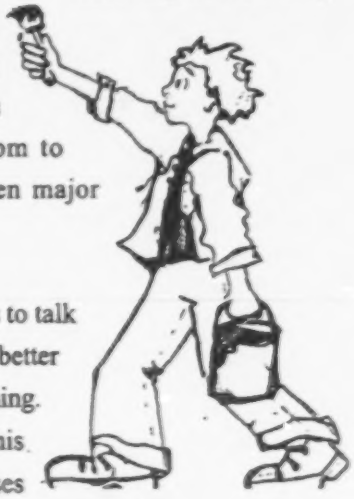
A Note on Mathematics

While math instruction was not a part of the data presentation on the five schools, it is worth noting that the program in School #6 emphasized algebra for all rather than just for the top students. This math program was an effort to respond to the national reform movement in mathematics, emphasizing problem-solving and authentic tasks. As part of this effort, every eighth grade student had algebra. In preparation, the fifth and sixth graders used the University of Chicago *Everyday Mathematics* and the seventh graders had *Transition Math*. As with the other content areas, the program included intensive staff development and follow-up support for teachers. It also

featured an "extra help" component for students who were in danger of not being able to keep up with the daily instructional pace. These students received a combination of computer-assisted instruction and structured cooperative learning to reinforce their regular math content.

Classroom Environment Differences

While the pedagogical and curriculum differences that students described in the other five schools indicated that students in the same school and district were receiving an uneven and inconsistent education, the classroom environment differences suggested that in some instances students were receiving little, if any, education at all. Few students in School #6 however, described being in classrooms where little learning took place. To the extent that they did offer contrasts in student learning and behavior from classroom to classroom, the comparisons tended to be between major subjects and a particular exploratory class.



For example, we asked a sub-sample of the students to talk about classroom situations in which students behaved better or worse and how these differences affected their learning. Two-thirds of the students with whom we explored this issue said that they were better behaved in some classes than others, about the same frequency as in the other five schools. However, School #6's students maintained that the disruptive classes were two particular exploratory subjects. Exploratory subjects – art, family life, music, etc. – tended to be troublesome in all of the schools. As one student explained, *"Students will act up if they think it is not an important class" (652612).* The problem at School #6, according to the students, was that the teacher of one of the subjects was "too nice" and, as a result, the teacher "can't control 'em" (663611).

The important development in School #6 was that the classrooms where learning

was difficult did not include the major subjects. The teachers in those classes, said one student, *"usually don't allow distractions; they tell us to 'settle down' and if they see something, they speak up and jump on it right away" (654621).*

There was one disagreement among several students about the classroom environment in a major subject. One student we talked to claimed that the students in this class rarely behaved and that little was accomplished. The very next student we interviewed, however, identified the class as his favorite while giving a hint that perhaps all was not going well:

> *My teacher's class is different. That's why I like it. He help us a lot – how to sit, how to talk, stop using slang. We free in the classroom to do what we want. He teach us how to be on our own when we get older...but he not talking to us anymore. The class was talking too much. He gave us enough work to do, he hasn't given up. He just want to show us "if you want to talk, I'm not going to teach." (666611)*

A third student in the class attributed the problems to the teacher's technique, comparing it to the other teacher on the team, but concluded that it was still possible to learn in the class:

> *The teacher, he don't have things planned out. He'll give out the work and forget it. He will tell us our research is due and then won't remind us. My other teacher, they all scared of him. They will talk real loud in his class but he can get us quiet; it takes awhile. But if we don't get quiet, we get the consequences. But I can learn in the other class too; it is just kind of loud. (667612)*

Thus, students described this teacher as not strict enough in the control sense. However, they all indicated that he still pushed them on academic matters, especially

with writing. With that, the students reported they understood that successful writing required multiple drafts and that the teacher consistently expected this to happen.

While students expressed varying degrees of satisfaction with their major subject teachers, almost every student indicated that the time in class was productive. This represented a dramatic departure from what we found in the other five schools where nearly every child could identify an entire major subject or a significant portion of the school year in which little of substance occurred.

Evidence of School Effects

Based on School #6's students' portrayals of their classrooms, it would appear that the classroom instructional differences that made students' experiences so dramatically uneven in the five schools were much less pronounced. However, not only was there greater consistency in pedagogy, content, and environment, but also there seemed to be a greater emphasis on mastering challenging content, at least to the extent that the curriculum offerings were developed from the current national standards of what students should know and be able to do.

The question arises then, were these students any educationally better off than their counterparts in the other five schools for having had this experience? We have three different forms of evidence that bear on this. The first is students' reactions to their schools as a whole; the second is standardized test data collected by the school district and School #6's partner; and the third comes from several students who had actually attended two of the other five schools in the study prior to coming to School #6. The comments from these students, although the most anecdotal, are perhaps the most telling because they are able to provide a comparative look deep inside the schools.

Students' Perspectives on School #6. It would be difficult to argue that students in School #6 were any more or less satisfied with their school than the students in

the other five were with theirs. All of the students tended to be extremely positive about the quality of the education they were getting and how prepared they were for high school. With little basis for comparison and despite complaints about certain classes, the students were essentially satisfied customers in all of the schools. Certainly the students in School #6 were able to provide numerous examples of being able to find the kinds of classrooms in which they could learn. Illustrative were the following:

> *My teacher make you do work. She will help you if you don't understand. Then she will check it, see how you doing it, and see that you doing it right. (655632)*
>
> *Most of the teachers teach. They don't try to put you down. They want you to learn. If we need help, they can give it until we understand it. (656621)*
>
> *The teachers really care for you. They make sure you get a full understanding. They keep asking, "do you get it? Do you want me to do it again?" (659621)*
>
> *My teachers, they pursue you. If you do something wrong, they on your back. They tell you they gonna help you, they tell you they want you to do good. (673612)*

If anything our sense was that there were more such examples in School #6 than in the others. The students' descriptions offered proof that this was true for the major subjects.

There was also evidence that the greater diversity in the student body had become the basis for the students' learning tolerance. Of course, the other schools had no control over this. An African-American male volunteered that he "hangs with the Arabic kids." When asked why, he said: *"They're funny. They crack jokes. They take me places." (604611)* A female of Arab ancestry commented: *"The students are all like best friends here. We all get along. [Why?] We just like each other. We hang out during lunch and gym even though none of them live near me." (608642)*

A Caucasian female suggested that, *"There is a good mix by race here. We are a really tight clique." (610652)* A Latina offered that, *"I hang with the black kids. I like anyone who gets along with me and they do." (612622)* And, finally, an African American female maintained that she liked school because: *"There are lots of different races and they teach me different things. They are very friendly." (616612)*

Tolerance seemed to carry over to settings where, in the other schools, control was typically fragile. In an assembly, one of the SLCs produced and performed the "Harlem Renaissance," something the students were studying in the social studies and RELA classes. The students introduced the movement as having three components – literature, art (visual and performing), and dance. They then proceeded to demonstrate these over a one-hour period by reading key passages of literature, singing, dancing, and acting. Even a teacher got into the act by playing a rousing piano rendition of "Let My People Go" that drew rapturous applause from the audience. It was impressive that all the performances seemed to captivate the audience. While teachers were scattered throughout the room, there was little need for them to intervene to correct misbehavior. Perhaps the most telling incident was when one of the performers froze and completely forgot his lines. He was reciting a poem but stopped after the first few lines when he forgot the remaining lines. Rather than laughing, one student member of the audience called out: "That's OK." Those words of encouragement gave him the confidence to start again with his eyes closed. He got half way through and froze again. Surprisingly, no one laughed or shouted a catcall. Instead, there was this rising crescendo of applause, which seemed to be the students' spontaneous way of diffusing an awkward moment. The performer walked off the stage, slightly embarrassed but not totally devastated.

> The teachers really care for you. They make sure you get a full understanding. They keep asking, "do you get it? Do you want me to do it again?"

Student Performance Data. The School District's *Children Achieving* initiative

includes a new accountability system that systematically tracks student achievement across three benchmark grades (grades four, eight, and eleven) for three major subject areas (reading, mathematics, and science). The District chose the Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth Edition (SAT-9), as the primary assessment tool. It assesses literacy, problem solving, and critical thinking. Students at the three benchmark grades have been tested annually since the 1995-96 school year. The results of these tests are reported as a percentage of students who scored in the advanced, proficient, basic, and below basic categories. The long term goal of the District, by the year 2008, is to have 95 percent of the students achieving at least at the proficient level.

> In order to get an A in RELA [at School #6] you need to read three books, do your logs, write in your journals, and have some graded prompts. It was not real clear what you have to do at School #3.

An analysis of the most commonly reported numbers, the percent of students performing at or above the basic level, suggest that five of the six schools showed growth from 1995/96 to 1997/98 in reading, four of the six produced improved mathematics performance, and all of them reported gains in science. School #6 did not show gains beyond the other schools. On the other hand, if the metric for analysis is the percent of students reaching proficient status or above (the primary target of the district), then students in School #6 outperformed students in the other five schools in reading and science, but not mathematics. The research and development center staff have also conducted more fine-grained analyses with test results more closely aligned with the program being implemented at School #6 and they found that relative to a matched sample of students in other schools, the students at School #6 who received extra help produced significant gains in mathematics performance. Positive classroom-level findings were also found for reading comprehension.

However, these quantitive findings must be interpreted with great caution. The testing program is still relatively new. The proportion of students achieving any degree of success is low relative to the entire sample. And, with the District's effort

to test all students, there are confounding issues of changing samples in each school that may explain growth. For example, some schools had fewer than half of their students taking the test during the baseline year and almost all of the growth those schools reported over a two year period could be accounted for simply by increasing the number of test-takers without ever improving the quality of instruction. For those reasons test scores may not be the best means for depicting the quality of students' school experiences.

Student Comparisons of School #6 with the Other Study Schools. Serendipity allowed us to interview five females and one male at School #6 who had previously attended two of the five original schools in the sample. Therefore, we were able to solicit, firsthand, the differences they encountered between the two schools. Their observations seemed to bear out the hints of a different tone to the school that were alluded to earlier.

> The teachers here care if you learn. Like if you don't do your homework, they make sure you stay after and get it done. I'm like learning in all my classes.

Two of the females we interviewed spent time at School #3. When making comparisons between the two schools, their comments naturally revolved around the nature of the work, the standards set for the work, teachers, and their peers. With respect to work, both commented that it was more difficult at School #6 than at School #3.

> *S: The work is challenging.*
> *I: Do you like doing hard work?*
> *S: I like doing work that is on my level. The work here is much harder than at School #3.*
> *I: Was School #3 too easy for you?*
> *S: I was beyond the work at School #3. Here the work is much harder and more like what I can do. (603612)*

School #6 teachers start you at your level and then move you up. School #3 teachers start you too low. (615612)

In a follow-up question to the high standards at School #6, both students made a point of talking about how they clearly felt that their work was tailored to a grade level above them:

In algebra they give us ninth grade work. Science is also ninth grade work. In reading, we are reading at a ninth grade level. (615612)

I: Are you doing lots of review work or are you learning new stuff?
S: We did some review early in the year but now we are doing mostly ninth grade stuff. Our teachers consider us ninth graders. That's what they tell us.
I: How is that different?
S: We are doing more work. In fact, we are doing work that even ninth graders wouldn't know.
I: Can you give me an example?
S: Yeah, like in RELA, we are learning about speeches of language.
I: What kinds of speeches?
S: We know about things like personification. (603612)

A comparison of experiences in science classes best illustrated the difference in instruction:

I: What do you do in science class?
S: We got to pick a project and we wrote a book on that topic that could be used to teach a six to eight year old about it.
I: What did you pick?
S: The solar system. . . . We also have science labs during our double period.
I: Do you do more in science than at School #3?
S: There all we did was read the book! At School #6 we do

experiments and have science contests.
I: Do you use the text book much at this school?
S: No. (615612)

In addition to the work, comparative conversation inevitably came around to teachers. With respect to the latter both students' claims suggested that the teachers at School #6 were much closer to the "no excuses" preferred mode that was described in such detail in the previous section. The teachers at School #6 reportedly showed more caring or empathy for their students:

S: The teachers pay attention to you more. They want to know your problems. They talk to you more. . . . I used to be bad. But now I have someone who cares.
I: Who is that?
S: The teachers.
I: What do they do?
S: If I have a D on a test they want to know why. They talk to us about our work. . . . Also, the teacher here tell you you can do it. At School #3 I had to do it on my own. At School #6, they are here to help me more.
I: When do you get help?
S: Before school. I come every other day at 7:15. (615612)

I: What is a good teacher?
S: A good teacher is someone who listens to your ways and lets you make your own mistakes.
I: Do teachers do that here at School #6?
S: Yes, teachers are good about that here. They are better than the ones at School #3.
I: Why is that?
S: At School #3 the teachers can't contain the students.
I: Who is responsible for that difference – the students, the teachers, or the school?
S: It's mostly the students. They are just better educated here. (603612)

This same student went on to talk about teachers at School #3 always being preoccupied with disciplinary matters and not being able to teach:

> *S: At School #3 they spend so much time with the bad kids, writing pink slips and giving detentions, so there is less time to teach. Here the teachers don't make you work. It's more on the student. They don't stop for those who don't want to learn. At School #3 I was always getting suspended.*
> *I: How do you behave here?*
> *S: I stay out of trouble. I got all 1s on my report cards (for behavior). I am much better than at School #3.*
> *I: Why?*
> *S: The teachers talk to us here and tell us about the importance of graduating and being ready for high school. They say we are no longer kids, but instead are adults and in high school they won't give us second chances. (603612)*

Both female students also referred to important differences in the standards at the two schools. This seemed to be a result of both individual teacher behavior and a more general school philosophy. One student commented about the standards in the classroom not being clear at School #3 while being crystal clear at School #6. The other student referred to standards in terms of the recognition the school gave to students:

> *In order to get an A in RELA [at School #6] you need to read three books, do your logs, write in your journals, and have some graded prompts. It was not real clear what you have to do at School #3. (615612)*

> *They just pile on the homework and projects at School #6. At School #3 they used to give us lots of awards but most of the kids didn't deserve them. Here, they have higher standards and they don't give out as many awards. (603612)*

Finally, the conversation also naturally fell to making comparisons about the students in the two buildings. The differences were quite striking:

> *S: At School #3 they (students) are rambunctious. They also like to stop others from doing their work. Here they are more sophisticated. They do their work. They are also more willing to help others.*
> *I: Why is that?*
> *S: I guess it's because they know it and they are just nicer. Here they are more sensitive about other cultures. Kids would really tease a Vietnamese or Cambodian student (at School #3), but they don't here.*
> *I: Why not?*
> *S: I don't know. Maybe because they teach us to be nice and the kids are not violent. (603612)*
>
> *S: At School #3 the kids don't care.*
> *I: Why?*
> *S: It's a neighborhood school and you just follow your friends. If the teacher don't tell you, you don't learn.*
> *I: What would happen if students went from School #3 to School #6?*
> *S: They would change [i.e., treat one another better].*
> *I: What would happen if students went from School #6 to School #3?*
> *S: They would not change [i.e., adopt bad habits of students at School #3], but they wouldn't be able to change [i.e., make better] the other students. (615612)*

In this final comparison, one of the girls talks about how students react to hard work at both schools, and how the attitude of their teachers influences that reaction:

> *I: What happened at School #3 when kids encountered hard work?*
> *S: They give up.*
> *I: What about at School #6?*

S: We try.
I: Why?
S: They teach you so you think you can do it. At School #3 they just give it to you. (615612)

Three females who had previously attended School #4 had similar reactions to their experiences in the two buildings. Most notable to them was the difference in student behavior. With respect to School #4, they said:

There were more fights there. It was in a bad neighborhood. (651622)

The students were more wild. (658622)
At School #4, the people were so bad. People were always talking. The surrounding neighborhood was bad. (664642)

Such was not the case at School #6.

The students here are more calm; but the neighborhood is becoming bad. (651622)

It is more quiet here. (658622)

The school is graffiti free; it is a clean environment. The students have manners; they cooperate. This school is much better. (664642)

Apparently there was a connection between the overall atmosphere and what went on in the classrooms, as two of the students mentioned:

The teachers here give a break to you. They explain it to you if you don't understand. (651622)

The teachers here care if you learn. Like if you don't do your homework, they make sure you stay after and get it done. I'm like learning in all my classes. (664642)

Indeed, for this last student, learning was the reason she left the previous school. Both she and her parents "thought I didn't learn anything. This school [#6] is much better."

One of the Latina students felt the comparison between the two schools was a little more complicated with respect to learning. She could not speak English when she entered School #4 and was able to be in a Spanish-only class in that building. For that reason, she was able to get "straight As" on her report card. In School #6 she was thrust into English only classes, with an occasional visit to an ESL Resource Room. For her, then, *"everything went down; they were teaching at a higher level and everything was English; and I was, like, 'Oh, my God!'"* Fortunately for her, the "no excuses" support net was in place. When asked how she managed to pass, the student explained:

> *My teachers said if you don't know how to do something, ask. They said, "we want you to pass." They said, "we're gonna help you do your work." They was interested in me learning. (658622)*

The student proudly finished her story:

> *Now I know more. I'm not falling asleep in class. I did that because I had no idea what was going on. So that's why now when you come into my class, you'll see me awake. (658622)*

A fourth student we talked to, a male, did not attend School #4 but had visited it and School #6 when his family had moved to the city and was trying to determine which school he should attend. His brief assessment pointed to the fairly obvious differences.

> *School #4 was not like so [made a smooth motion with his hand]. It looked like people were not learning; they were all out of their seats. This school [#6] is much better. (669641)*

Summary

Our data show that there was a much greater consistency in pedagogy, content, and classroom environment in School #6 and that the pedagogy and content, in science and English at least, were in line with current national thinking. This suggests that students in the school probably encountered fewer academic cracks in their classroom floors and, when they did, there was a greater likelihood that additional help was available. Whether or not being in a school with more "pockets of success" will show up more dramatically in the future on the District's standardized measures of achievement remains to be seen. However, it is safe to say that the students tested at School #6 had had access to similar educational experiences whereas their counterparts in the other schools were much more varied in that respect. The educational differences certainly seem significant even if the statistical ones do not.

Section 7: Recommendations

The students in our study expected to succeed in life. They planned to graduate from high school, go to college, and have satisfying careers. Moreover, they were entirely trusting that the preparation they were receiving in school prepared them to accomplish these goals. Statistics say they were wrong; and the students themselves were able to describe gaps in their education that were setting the stage for failure. However, students were also able to identify ways of supporting learning that promised to counter the many daunting obstacles they would encounter: an academic push, extra help, clear explanations, varied activities, discipline, and relevance. These qualities were the manifestations of a "no excuses" philosophy that made success a school responsibility. It is this philosophy that we think must infuse all efforts to improve education in Philadelphia. The following recommendations all target this goal.

Focus on underlying beliefs about a school's role in supporting student learning rather than discrete "best practices" as the target of reform. Caring, defined as acting in the best interests of others (Noddings, 1992), was intuitively recognized by the students as teachers refusing to allow them to fail. In our opinion, it is this refusal, this unwillingness to accept any excuses for failure, that separates classrooms where students succeed from those where they do not. Even if a teacher tries to adhere to current thinking about best instructional practices, students in these schools will fall through the cracks unless the teacher also believes that it is his or her responsibility to construct a supportive net to catch them. Good instructional practice increases the likelihood that more students will understand their work and be willing to do it; the "no excuses" philosophy ensures that a teacher will not accept helping **more** students as a proxy for helping **all** students. In these schools especially, if students are free to fail, many will. In other words, limiting the schools' responsibility to a "we do the best we can but it's really up to the students and their parents" approach is simply another way of dooming large numbers of students to failure.

Improving pedagogy and the quality and consistency of subject content is indeed progress. The schools will become better in a professional technical sense. However, shaping adults' beliefs about the need for additional support is true reform. It alters the assumptions behind the actions and spurs the creation of classroom environments in which every child enrolled in the regular instructional program can find the encouragement, help, explanations, variety of activities, discipline, and connections to their lives necessary to achieve.

Emphasize, then, the quality of the relationships between teachers and students. The Philadelphia reforms are not much different from those proposed elsewhere for urban students in terms of reducing the sheer numbers of students that adults encounter daily. Certainly we would not argue that reduced class size, small learning communities within buildings, and looping are ill-advised. These may even be necessary companions to creating productive relationships, but they are not sufficient. Lower numbers means fewer relationships to build, but the relationships still have to be built. Students' descriptions of the classrooms they want to be in collectively paint a portrait of teachers who become deeply involved with student learning. Small classrooms are not necessarily better if the teachers in them still accept failure. It is the quality of the relationships in the classrooms that determines the educational value of the setting, not mere changes in the physical arrangements of the setting.

Changes in student performance standards must be accompanied by the creation of standards for pedagogy, content and classroom environment – and the professional development necessary to implement them. Currently the District is using standardized measures of progress to assess an obviously unstandardized education for students. Students in some classes have better chances to be instructed in ways that accommodate their learning styles than do students in other classes. Students in some classes encounter entirely different content than do students in other classes in the same subject in the same grade in the same school. Students in some classes have more opportunities to learn than do their peers in other classes where discipline is absent. The lesson from School #6 is that establishing expectations about and providing training for how a subject should be taught, what should be

taught, and the kind of classroom conducive to learning can create much greater consistency and closer adherence to discipline-based definitions of good practice in the instructional program. While these changes may not have shown up immediately in the District's standardized test scores, School #6's students' high degree of involvement in investigative science and their sophisticated understanding of the complexities of writing clearly underscored that desirable educational benefits were present to a greater degree than in the other study schools. Of course, School #6 received an incredible amount of outside support. Just as teachers, according to students, should not fail students who had no chance of succeeding unless they had extra help, so too low-performing schools should not be punished by an accountability system unless they have had access to similar sources of support.

Connect changes in standards to grades, not just to performance on large-scale assessments. Standards are for adults; grades are for kids. One would wish for some degree of congruence between the two but it was grades, not district-devised performance indices, that students relied on to gauge progress. In the previous pages, grades popped up as a central ingredient to students' notions about how to get to college and to secure a satisfying career. In our previous reports, grades were a major reference point for how students defined the extent of their success in school. Put simply, grades were endemic to students' notions about how they were doing in school. What this means, we think, is that standards will have to be thoughtfully and uniformly connected to report card grades if they are to have meaning for students. For example, being able to be an A or B student and performing below the "basic" level on a standardized test would seem to be an irreconcilable contradiction in measuring academic performance. Careful and thorough attention will have to be given to what each individual teacher expects of his/her students and how consistently these expectations are communicated and reinforced from classroom to classroom.

Create "extra help" situations that encompass all students who need it, not just those students who avail themselves of it. As more students have access to caring relationships with adults, then, and only then, the District should redefine the level of acceptable work. However, students will not automatically meet these redefined

expectations without increased opportunities for extra help. As the District acknowledges, to make it tougher to pass without providing support for doing so will do no good. In all of the schools, students could identify a teacher who would provide additional tutoring or a couple of afternoons where after-school help was available. This, of course, was entirely discretionary, and had to be when such help fell outside the regular school day. However, School #5 had managed to establish a discretionary and formal after-school program that involved an apparently large number of students. Certainly it was more systematic and thorough than an individual tutoring program. School #6 altered its schedule to give students extra time in science and English and created an in-school "extra help" program in math. These efforts appeared to be extremely effective and should become a part of the "no excuse support net" in all of the schools.

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Appendix A: Student Interview Protocols

Year 1

1. What do you plan to do in terms of further schooling and in terms of work/ career? Do you feel that this school is preparing you well to do that? Why? What happens here at school that is particularly helpful to your learning? What happens that is not particularly helpful? What else could the school be doing to help you with your plans?

2. What kinds of activities in class help you learn best? Why? Examples? Do you get to do these activities in all of your subjects or only in some? What kinds of activities in class do not help you learn? Why? Examples? What do teachers do that helps you learn? How does this help you learn? What could teachers do to help you learn more? Why? What opportunities do you have to work with computers or other technology?

3. Are you successful in school? Definition? Why? What does it take to succeed here? What is your teacher's definition of success? How do teachers let you know of your success? Is this definition the one that should be expected of you? Why? Is it difficult or easy for you to be successful?

4. Do you feel safe at school? Why? Are there unsafe places at school? Do you have any suggestions on what else the school should be doing about safety?

5. What do you like best about being at this middle school? Why? What do you like least about being here? Why?

6. Do you feel like you are part of the school (that you are welcome)? What makes you feel welcome? What happens that makes you feel unwelcome? Do you have any concerns about coming to and being at school?

7. How often do you have homework? Do you usually do yours? Why? When do you tend to do it? What help do you have (who helps you) with your homework? Do you prepare for your classes and for tests? How do you do this?

8. How do you feel about school lunches? Why don't students eat them?

9. How easy was it for you to make the change from elementary to middle school? Why? How did you end up at [school]? Would you recommend this school to siblings/family?

10. Do you usually know how well you have done on a test or project before you received a grade or do you have to rely on the teacher to know how well you have done? How do your teachers figure out what grade to give you? Could you explain how your grade is determined in your favorite class? Your least favorite?

11. Who decides which activities you will do in your classes? Are you ever asked for your advice on what to do? Would you like more of these opportunities? Suggested activities that you would like to see in your classes?

12. Do you get much of a chance to be creative? Why? Examples? Would you like more opportunities to be creative? Why?

13. Are students treated fairly here? Why? What do students do that gets themselves in trouble? How are these problems handled? Is this the best way to handle them? What do students get praised for? Examples? Are there other things that students should get praised for?

14. What is your favorite class? Why? What activities do you like to do in this subject?

15. Are you involved in any extracurricular activities here? Which ones? Are there any other activities you would like to see offered that aren't?

16. Why do you think some students do not want to go to class? What can be done to change this?

17. Why do some students hang in the hallways? What can [school] do to help them?

18. How do students treat one another here? How can the school get students to show respect for one another?

Year 2

I. Why do students report they are successful when indicators suggest they aren't? How do teachers' standards influence students' views of their performance?

(a) What does it take to get an A in a particular class? (sample across major subjects)
(b) What is the difference between an A and a C in that class?
(c) A C and a F?
(d) Is that true for all of your classes?
(e) If not, what are some of the differences across classes?
(f) What grades do you usually get?
(g) Is it easy or difficult to get those grades?
(h) How hard is it to get an A?
(i) What subjects do you do research in when putting together projects or reports?
(j) What are the steps you go through to put together your research project/report? (probe for putting information in their own words)
(k) What kind of feedback do teachers give you on your research? (letter grades or comments)
(l) Do teachers make you redo work that they say is not acceptable? How do you respond?

II. *Why do students say they value education but don't behave accordingly?*

(a) Students say they value education, but few of you act like you want to be in school. Why?

(b) What would it take for students to show more enthusiasm for school?

(c) What sort of activities would really get your attention?

(d) How do these activities help you learn better?

(e) What do teachers need to do to make classes more interesting?

(f) Can you tell me about some activities in your classes that really helped you learn?

III. *Are the differences in instruction that students experience from class to class important?*

(a) Do students behave differently for different teachers? How and why?

(b) Do you learn more in some classes than others?

(c) How do you know you are learning more? Why?

(d) How much of this difference depends on you and how much depends on the teacher?

(e) What does the teacher do who helps you learn more?

IV. *Why do so many students say they will attend college but few will likely do so?*

(a) Do you plan to go to college?

(b) Why do you say this?

(c) Do your teachers talk about students going to college?

(d) How will college help you?

(e) What will you need to do in school to be able to go to college?

(f) How many people do you know who have gone to college?

(g) What have they told you about college?

V. *Do students value challenging work?*

(a) How do students react when the work in school is hard for them?

(b) What kind of work is hard for you? (What does hard mean?) Why?

(c) What do you do when the work gets hard? Why?

(d) What should the teacher do to help you when the work is hard?
(e) Do you prefer easy work or hard work? Why?
(f) Do you like learning outside of school?
(g) Is reading part of that learning?
(h) How often do you read outside of school?
(i) Where do you get your reading materials?
(j) Is the school library a challenging/fun place to learn?
(k) How often do you visit there?
(l) What do you do when you are there?
(m) Who do you go with?
(n) Does the library have the materials you need?

Year 3

I. *How is school going this year?*
(a) Do you feel like you are getting a good education? Why?
(b) How well prepared are you for high school? Why?
(c) Has anything changed at this school during the three years you have been here? What?
(d) What advice would you give for improving the school?

II. *Tell us about specific classes this year? (probing for each subject separately)*
(a) What does your daily routine in _____ class look like? What activities do you do most often?
(b) What activities help you best and how frequently do you do them?
(c) How well are you doing (grades) this year? Do you understand how your grade is determined?
(d) Are you learning new things or do your classes review things you have already learned?
(e) Do you learn more in some classes than others? Why? Do you behave better for some teachers than others? Why?
(f) What is your favorite class and why?

(g) How do you know when you are doing well?

(h) How do you define a good teacher?

(i) Do you prefer when your teacher gives you challenging or easy work? What is challenging work?

(j) Do you prefer your teacher to push you to get your work done or leave it up to you?

III. *Future plans?*

(a) Where are you going to high school?

(b) How did you decide about which high school to go to and where did you get information about the schools?

(c) What role did your parents and teachers play in your high school selection?

(d) What are your plans beyond high school? Why have you changed your plans (from previous years, if they have)?

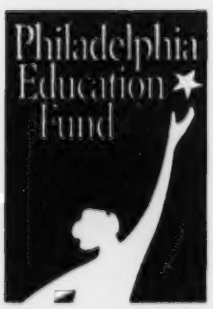
(e) Do you think you can get where you want to go with your current effort? Are you on the right track?

(f) What might you have to do to make sure you can reach your goals?

About the Authors

Bruce Wilson is an independent educational researcher whose research interests include school change, educational policy, and organizational analysis. His current work in five separate states includes research on arts education, on parent involvement, on adult literacy, on race-related achievement gaps, and on elementary science education. He has co-authored three books on education reform and has published extensively in scholarly journals. He is currently an adjunct professor at Teachers College, Columbia University.

H. Dickson Corbett is also an independent educational researcher whose special interest lies in understanding students' experiences in schools undergoing reform. He also conducts evaluations of innovative programs and practices. Current evaluations include investigations of urban teachers' assumptions about their students as learners and the effects of these assumptions on student performance; the integration of arts- based education into core academic subjects; urban elementary science and math reform; and parents' involvement as advocates for reform. He is the author of several books and numerous journal articles. He edits a book series on "Restructuring and School Change" for the State University of New York Press.



Seven Benjamin Franklin Parkway
Philadelphia, PA 19103
215.665.1400
www.philaedfund.org